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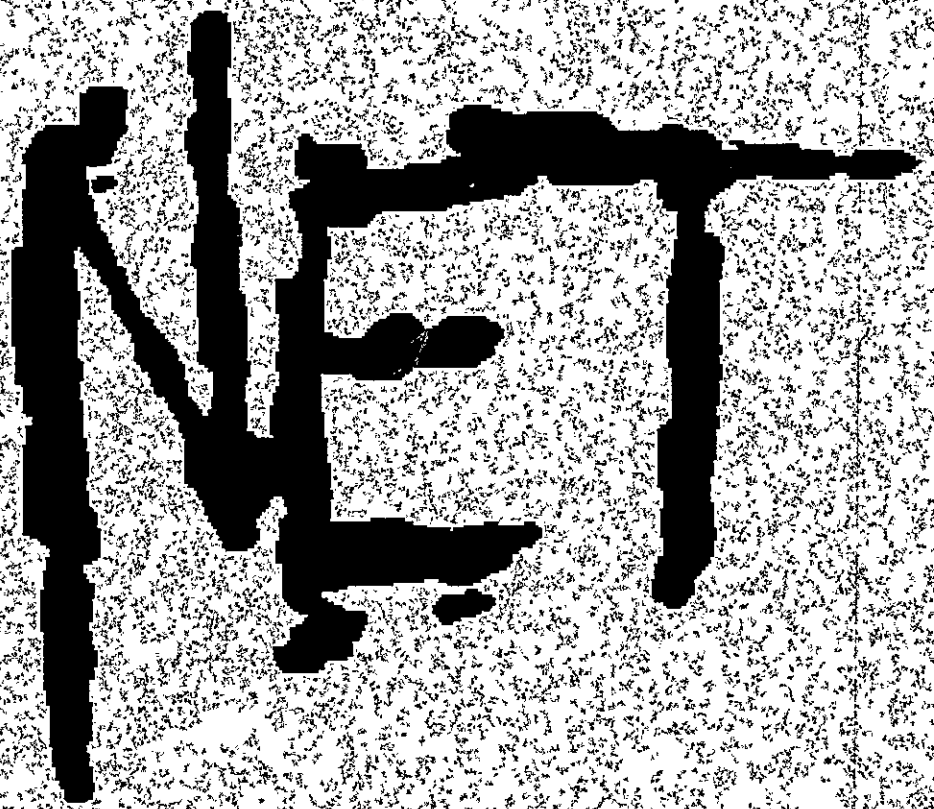

Tales from FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L
Issue #2

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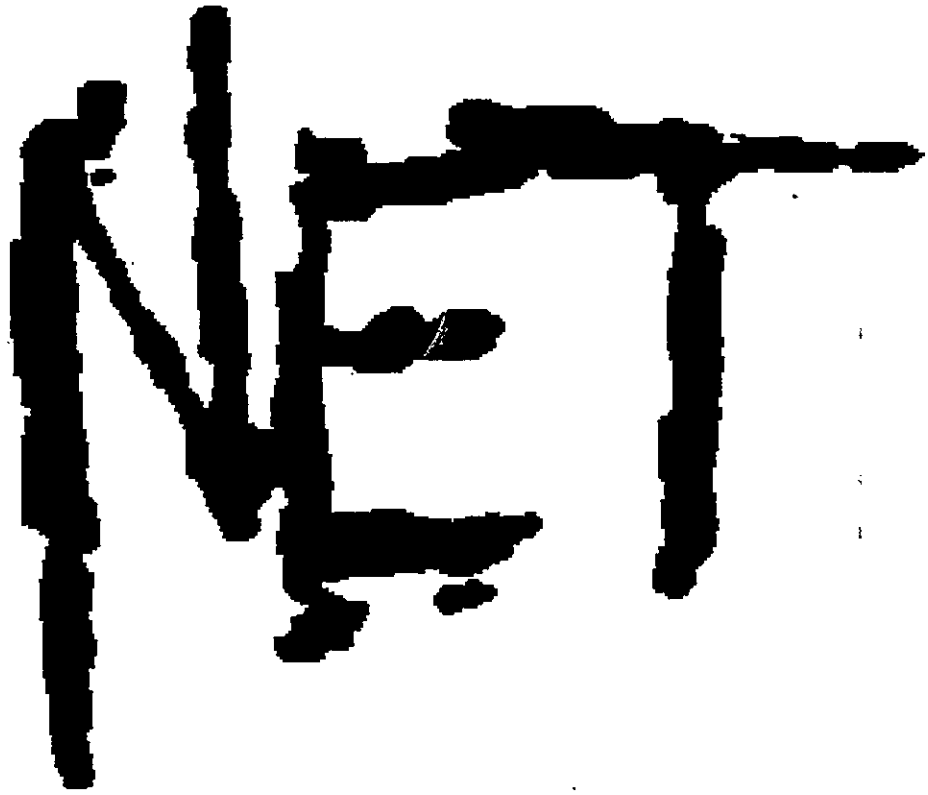

Tales from FORKNI-L and FKFIC-L
Issue #2

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Editors' Introduction

by Valery King and Karin Welss

Hello again, everyone, and welcome to our second issue of *Forever Net*. First, the important news:

WE'VE BEEN RENEWED!!! WE'VE BEEN RENEWED!!!

Okay, I'll stop shouting now, but it's worth shouting about. After an intense letter-writing campaign on the part of the fans, and some amazing support from several powers-that-be at Tri-Star and Columbia Pictures, a deal is set that will put new *Forever Knight* episodes into syndication. Latest word has it that we will be getting new shows this fall, offered first to CBS stations and then, if a station passes it up, to independent stations in that particular market. So it isn't quite over yet, boys and girls. A phone call to your local CBS affiliate would not come amiss...

And now, to the zine.

For those of you just joining us, I need to explain that this is not your common, everyday-type fanzine. No, this is a marvel of the computer age, an electronic fanzine—despite the fact that it's printed on paper.

What makes it "electronic" is the source of the stories: an Internet mailing list—well, two of them, actually—called FKFIC–L and FORKNI–L, both devoted entirely to *Forever Knight*. Folks with the good fortune to have Internet access (in one form or another) can subscribe to these electronic mailing (or email) lists, and read and post messages to them. Following this introduction Karin has reprinted the instructions for subscribing to the lists that we published in the first issue.

But this zine is mostly for those of you who, for whatever reason, don't or can't subscribe to our lists. FORKNI–L is the chat list, where we can all talk to one another about our mutual passion, *Forever Knight*. FKFIC–L is an offshoot of that list, and the sole source of the material between these covers: the *Forever Knight* fan-fiction mailing list! Subscribers write *Forever Knight* fiction, and post it for the rest of us to read; the quality of most of this fiction is so high, that I felt it was a real shame that folks without computers couldn't read it too, and thus was *Forever Net* born.

And even though this zine is over 200 pages, this is not all the fiction that's appeared on the list. We've had to pass on some really great stuff, simply for reasons of space.

I hope you enjoy these stories. Many of the authors have agreed to have their email addresses printed, so if you have email access you can send your comments directly to them or to me (Internet: `kingv@ccmail.orst.edu`) and I'll pass them on. The more traditional method of putting words on paper and sticking a stamp on it is also still available; you can send comments and suggestions to the address below, and I'll pass them along to the appropriate party. Even if you want to phone it in (although none of you probably live in Corvallis so I don't know why you'd want to pay so much money when a letter will do...) I'm game, although you'll probably get the machine. We love to hear from people, especially if it's nice.

So read, enjoy, write... and keep watching for new episodes!

Your fly-by-Knight Editor:

Valery King
InterKnight Press
2160 NW Janssen #12
Corvallis, OR 97330

How to subscribe to the Internet FORKNI–L and FKFIC–L mailing lists

The FORKNI–L and FKFIC–L mailing lists are maintained by an automatic system on BITNET called the *listserv*. The listserv is a software program that handles tasks such as membership additions, removals, and requests for archived material.

Send subscription requests, removal requests, etc. for FORKNI–L and FKFIC–L to `LISTSERV@PSUVM.PSU.EDU` (on Internet) or `LISTSERV@PSUVM` (on BITNET). When sending commands to the LISTSERV, leave the subject line blank, and don't include punctuation, a signature, or other non-command text in your message. When sending multiple commands in a single mail file, each command must be on a separate line, with no blank lines between commands.

To subscribe, send this command to the LISTSERV:

```
SUBSCRIBE listname your_name
```

Example To subscribe to FORKNI–L, you might send the following email message:

```
Date: Thu, 06 Jan 1994 11:09:32 -0800 (PST)
From: Karin Welss <karinw@mdli.com>
Subject:


SUBSCRIBE FORKNI-L Karin Welss
```

You should receive a message from listserv within 24 hours, confirming your subscription to the list. To post to FORKNI–L, e-mail your message to `FORKNI-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU` (Internet) or `FORKNI-L@PSUVM` (BITNET). To post fiction to FKFIC–L, send your story (or story part) as e–mail to `FKFIC-L@PSUVM.PSU.EDU` (Internet) or `FKFIC-L@PSUVM` (BITNET). The subject line should contain a short version of the story's name (or the full name, if it's short enough), and, if a multi-part story, the part number.

Caroline

by Sharon S. Scott

Toronto, 1993

Schanke grumbled into the phone, "He's on indefinite leave, Nat. That's all I can tell you cause that's all I've been told. Yours truly would like to know what's goin' on too, but all I've been told is that he's on leave. Gimme a break, huh? This is no fun for me either— I get to break in a temporary partner, and that ain't no picnic in the park. This guy is so wet behind the ears you wouldn't believe it." He stopped and listened a minute, then continued in an irritated tone.

"Yeah, I know he's been acting even stranger than usual lately. Whatcha think, that I haven't been payin' attention? He's come in late and left early a lot lately, but I'm tellin' ya, I don't know what's goin' on. You know he never tells me anything important, like he thinks I can't keep a secret..." Schanke stopped again.

"Hey, I know nothin'— I dunno what's got him upset, and I dunno where he is. He doesn't answer the phone, his car's not there. What else can I tell ya? All I know is that he's been lookin' like something the cat dragged in. You want any other late-breakin' news, you're gonna have to ask him, not me. And I gotta go now. Call me if you hear from him, okay? Ditto. Hasta la bye-bye."

Schanke put down the receiver, then turned to the young officer standing beside his desk. "Okay, amigo, let's vamoose. Got to go rope and hogtie some bad guys." He sighed as he watched his new partner trip over the wastebasket on the way out the door. Knight might be strange, but at least he didn't fall over the furniture.

Natalie hung up, then lifted the receiver again and punched in Nick's number. She let it ring until his machine kicked in. "Nick, call me. No matter what time. *Call* me."

She hadn't heard from him in four days, and had been leaving messages on his machine for the last three. He hadn't responded. She'd driven by the warehouse several times to check for lights or his car. The lights were off, and the car was nowhere to be seen.

She'd called Janette, hoping that she knew what was going on and would be inclined to tell. No luck. If Janette knew anything, she wasn't revealing it, not to a mortal, anyway.

"You know how Nicholah is, Dr. Lambert. He'll... reappear when his mood changes. I wouldn't worry— he's been taking care of himself for a long time."

Yeah, right, just what I wanted to hear. Thanks for everything, Janette. She got up and went to the kitchen for yet another cup of coffee and was startled to see Sydney sitting on top of the cabinet, an angry look in his eyes.

"What's your problem, cat?"

Sydney meowed loudly, jumped from the countertop to the floor, stood in front of the cabinet door behind which his cans of food resided, and meowed again.

"Okay, okay, so you're hungry. Give me a break, Sydney, I've had a really bad day."

She opened a can of food and put it into the cat's bowl, then leaned against the counter, lost in thought. Sydney finished his meal, gave himself a quick bath, and then rubbed his head against Nat's leg. Startled out of her reverie, she gave him a quick scratch, then went back into the living room, her mind back to the puzzle of Nick.

Schanke was right, he had been behaving even more strangely than usual recently. He'd been distant, preoccupied, not quite on the same planet with everyone else. He seemed to be only going through the motions at work, and, uncharacteristically, had been letting Schanke take the lead on most of their cases. And, if his appearance was any indication of his state of mind, he was troubled indeed— dark circles under his eyes, an even more obvious than usual pallor, and he had become thinner, almost gaunt.

She had tried to get him to talk to her, to no avail. Her persistent questions had earned her a quick, "Everything's okay, Nat," then irritation, then stony silence, and then he'd started avoiding her whenever possible. Despite all her efforts, she hadn't learned a thing.

Obviously Stonetree knew something was seriously wrong, or he wouldn't have approved an indefinite leave of absence. She decided a call to the Captain couldn't hurt, but a quick conversation revealed only the information that Nick's reason for the leave was "personal." She'd figured that out already.

Sydney padded into the room and jumped onto her lap. She absentmindedly scratched his ears, then tried Nick's number again, and got his machine, again. "Yeah, Nick Knight here. I'm either in bed or incommunicado"— at which point she slammed the phone down in disgust.

"Well, Sydney, I'm obviously wasting my time and temper, and accomplishing absolutely nothing. He's still 'incommunicado' and apparently wants it that way. Let's go to bed."

The next evening at work she caught herself snapping at Grace for the second time. "I apologize. It's not your fault I'm in a bad mood, and I shouldn't be taking it out on you. Please ignore me from now on, okay?"

Grace accepted the apology with her usual good humor and went on about her business, keeping a wary eye on the doctor, waiting for an opportunity to find out what was going on.

Shortly after 9 p.m. the phone rang on Nat's desk. She covered the body she'd been taking samples from and answered. "Medical Examiner's Office. Dr. Lambert. What's your problem?"

"Natalie?" The voice was hesitant, but it was Nick's.

"Well, thank God. The mystery man reappears. Where are you? What's going on? Are you okay? Nick? Talk to me."

"Just give me a chance, okay? I'm fine."

"Well, you shouldn't just disappear like this. I worry."

"Don't. I'm okay. What time are you off work tonight?" His tone of voice indicated stress, but he was obviously trying not to alarm her.

"At 11. And then I'm off until Monday night. Why? Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm okay, all right? I've been staying with a friend, and she needs some help. Could you come over when you get off?" There was a pleading tone in his voice that she'd never heard before.

"Nat? Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Okay, where are you?"

"Forrest Lane. 207 Forrest Lane. My car's in the drive."

"Got it. 207 Forrest Lane. Car in the drive. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I really appreciate this." He hesitated, then said plaintively, "And, Nat ... bring your medical bag."

He hung up before she could ask any more questions. Her mind raced with the possibilities of his words. *My medical bag? Oh, God, my medical bag. Just slow down—he said he wasn't hurt. He said he was okay. So why does he need medical supplies? And a doctor? And who is "she"?*

She forced herself to take a deep breath, trying to stem her panic. *Calm yourself. Think. Think about what emergency supplies he might need. And hurry up about it, old girl.*

She reached for her medical bag and started filling it with one of almost everything she had on hand in the way of medical supplies. Then she traded her lab coat for an outdoor one, grabbed her handbag and keys, and walked quickly out of the autopsy room. Grace looked up as she approached, alarm spreading across her face as she registered the coat, the medical bag, and the expression on the doctor's face.

"Natalie, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I've just been called out on a case. Depending on how long it takes to wrap it up, I may not see you again until Monday. Would you cover the phone for me?"

"Of course." Grace hesitated, then said, "Are you sure you're all right? You look upset about something."

"I'm fine. Really. Just catch the phone while I'm out, okay?" Grace nodded.

Long strides took her from the outer office without waiting for more of a reply, and she broke into a run as she left the building, heading across the parking lot towards her car. As she reached it, she dropped her keys and swore. When she finally got the door unlocked, she threw the two bags in, started the car, and headed for Forrest Lane. Quickly.

She found the narrow street in less than 30 minutes, and slowed down to look for the right house. "207, 207. Where the hell is it?"

She drove a few more blocks, then spotted Nick's car in the driveway of a Victorian-style two-story. She pulled over to the curb, grabbed her bags, and started toward the house.

Dim light shone through the lace curtains of a ground-floor window, and the porch light was on. She reached the front door and raised her hand to knock, but it opened before she touched it. Nick stood in the doorway, looking even worse than he had the last time she'd seen him. His face was grim, but at the sight of her a weary smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"Come in, Nat. You're here sooner than I expected."

"Yeah, well, no problem. You know how I am about speed limits. But I'm here, safe and sound, ready, willing, and able. Can I come in?"

"I'm sorry. I'm so tired I've forgotten my manners. Please do come in out of the cold, Doctor Lambert." He made a courtly bow as she walked into a living room which, despite the heavy, dark wood of the furniture, looked comfortable and inviting. The wood didn't glow as it should have, and a fine layer of dust covered everything in the room. The dark velvet drapes looked as if they needed a good cleaning, as did the Oriental rug on the floor. There were books everywhere, in the bookcases, and on the tables, and in stacks on the floor. A baby grand piano stood in one corner, sheet music in a toppling pile near the bench. The top of the piano was covered with photographs in ornate silver frames, although the light was too dim to identify the faces in the pictures.

She turned and saw Nick standing at the foot of the stairs, head angled as if listening for something upstairs.

"Nick?"

He started at the sound of her voice, then turned and spoke softly. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Make myself comfortable? You must be kidding. You call and tell me you have a friend who needs some help, then tell me to bring my medical bag, and now you want me to just kick off my shoes and relax? What's going on here, Nick?"

He moved up the stairs as if he hadn't heard a word she'd said. When he reached the top, he walked quickly to the open door of a room she assumed was a bedroom and went in. She heard him speaking to someone, although she couldn't understand what he was saying.

She put her bags down, removed her coat, laid it over the back of a chair, and squared her shoulders. *Okay, he's got you here and now he's ignoring you. So now what?*

And then she heard what sounded like a moan from the room upstairs. When she heard the sound a second time, she grabbed her medic bag and ran up the stairs. She stopped at the open door, and looked hesitantly into the room Nick had entered. It *was* a bedroom, a woman's bedroom. There were perfume bottles, a silver-backed hairbrush and mirror, and a jewelry chest on the mahogany dresser. The heavy drapes were drawn and the only light came from a small bedside lamp.

Nick was sitting on the edge of a four–poster bed, his head bent, his hands holding those of an old woman. It was hard to guess her age, but the wrinkling and age spots on her face, neck and hands put her in the seventy-to-eighty-something age group. Her gray hair was in a long braid over one shoulder, and her face was pale, showing the ravages of time and illness. Her breathing was so shallow that the nine-patch quilt which covered the bed barely moved.

He whispered, *"Mais non, Caro, mon coeur,"* and raised her hands and kissed them gently. The woman's eyes opened, focused on his face, then shone as she looked into his eyes and smiled.

"Nicky, you know I never learned to speak French. Tell me what you said."

He smiled at her and held her hands against his chest. "You know exactly what I said and what I meant. You always have."

She sighed, then smiled. "You're right, as usual. I just wanted to hear you say my name again."

He raised her hands to his lips once more, then stopped as her eyes closed and a look of pain crossed her face.

"What is it? Is there something I can do?"

"Nothing, except... it's just too much... I can't take it any longer. You have to let go."

"No. It's too soon."

She stared at him. "Too soon? Nicky, it's been over sixty years. I'm old, and I'm tired, and it's time."

Her eyes closed again as he touched her cheek gently. "Later, Caro. Sleep now. I'll be here if you need me." He stood and watched her face for a few moments, then looked up and caught sight of Nat. She waited for him at the top of the stairs as he closed the door, walked past her, and sat down heavily on the top step.

She sat beside him on the step and asked softly, "Who is she?" When he didn't answer, she touched his arm. "Nick, you asked for my help. Now tell me what's going on. Who is she?"

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. When he began to speak, his voice was flat, almost devoid of emotion, and he stared into the distance.

"Her name is Caroline Miller. She's a friend. An old friend. And a very good friend." He stopped and rubbed his face with his hands.

"How long have you been awake?"

"I've caught a few catnaps while she slept. I'm okay."

"Have you... eaten?"

"Not to worry, Nat. She keeps... supplies for me. She's had firsthand experience in dealing with my particular problem."

She thought about that a moment, then said slowly, "Then she's a part of your past, I assume?" Nick gave her one of his looks, and she went on, carefully. "Okay, I guess I assumed correctly. So if that's the case, why did you call me? You aren't normally very open about your past."

His embarrassment showed on his face. "Nat, let's not go into that now, okay? I called you because she's hurting, but she's too stubborn to admit it. She refuses to go into hospital. I could have forced her to, but I thought maybe you could do something for her here. I know it's a lot to ask... "

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's got a heart condition. Has had for years. She's been bedridden for the last couple of months."

"Who's been taking care of her?"

"I have, when I could. I hired a private nurse for when I couldn't be here. But Caroline sent her away, fired her, actually, when the woman insisted that she needed to be in hospital. So here I am. On leave, indefinitely."

"I know about the leave. I weaseled that information out of Schanke and Stonetree— they were worried about you. And so was I. You could have let us know."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to worry anyone. Least of all you." He paused, trying to keep his emotions in check. "I just felt that it was a very private matter. It's not easy to watch someone you've loved for so many years... die."

"I know, Nick. I watched Richard die. Twice. Remember?"

He put a hand on her arm. "Yes, I remember. How could I forget? Damn, I should never have gotten you involved in this. I was just hoping against hope that you could help her."

"I won't know whether there's anything I can do until I examine her. And I'm not making you, or her, any promises. I haven't practiced this kind of medicine since med school, but I'll try."

"Thank you, for whatever you can do. I'll go talk to her." He rose and started for the door, then came back, kissed the top of her head, and went into the bedroom.

When he came back out in a few minutes, he said, "She's agreed to the exam, but she's still adamant about not going into hospital."

"I'll do what I can, but you understand that may not be much?"

"Understood. I've explained to her that you're a close friend as well as a doctor, and she's agreeable— well, as agreeable as Caroline ever gets. She's always been a headstrong woman. I'll be downstairs if you need me, okay? Just call."

When he started downstairs she picked up her bag and entered the bedroom. Caroline's eyes opened as she set the bag on the bedside table.

"Doctor Lambert, you're wasting your time and mine."

"Ms. Miller, I understand Nick explained who and what I am, and you've agreed to an examination?"

The woman coughed, tried to take a deep breath, and finally answered. "My name is Caroline. And yes, go ahead, but I warn you, you're wasting your time."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. But go ahead if it'll make you and Nicky feel any better."

Nat removed the stethoscope from her bag and prepared to start the exam. "How old are you, Caroline?"

"I'm eighty-seven. And I won't live to be eighty-eight. So do your stuff and then leave me in peace."

Natalie smiled. *I think Nick's right—she does seem to have a mind of her own, and I'd not like to be the one to try to change it.* Caroline's brown eyes were clear, but her skin had a grayish tone and seemed almost translucent. As she turned the woman's arm to check her pulse, she noticed a group of small white dots, in pairs, on the inside of her wrist and elbow. On closer examination, the dots appeared to be old scars of some sort. She started to ask about them, but then the most likely answer came to her, and she almost dropped Caroline's arm. Recovering her composure, she continued the exam. The woman's pulse was weak and erratic, and her heart sounded like it was drowning in fluid. Her fingernails were slightly blue— all of which added up to a worn-out body which was barely functioning.

She glanced up and found Caroline looking at her with amused resignation. "So what's the verdict, Doc? Will I ever dance again?"

"You need to be in hospital, Caroline. There's not much I can do for you here— you need more medical help than I can give you."

"Hospitals can't cure old age, and besides, I hate them. I've made my choice— if I have to die, I'll do it here, in the house I love, with the man I love. Or should that be the man we both love?" She paused and smiled at the look on the younger woman's face. "Don't look so surprised— I've loved Nicky for a long time, and I recognize the signs."

Flustered, Nat answered quickly, "You're mistaken, I'm afraid. Nick's a good friend, but that's all."

Caroline closed her eyes. "Keep trying to convince yourself of that— it won't work, but keep trying."

Natalie began to dig through the contents of her bag, searching for a syringe and the correct vial. "If you won't go into hospital, about all I can do for you is give you something for the pain."

"Something that'll make me sleep through my last few days? No, thank you." She opened her eyes and searched Natalie's face. "Or is it hours, rather than days?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" When Caroline nodded, she answered slowly. "I'm afraid it may not be days. You're in congestive heart failure."

"Yes, I did know that— I've been to all the doctors and I've taken all their medications, none of which are working any longer. So quit bothering me and go see about Nicky."

"Nick? He's downstairs. You're the one who needs help, not him."

Caroline's eyes blazed. "If you believe that, then you're not as bright as I thought. Get out of here and go see about him. He needs someone to help him get through this, and it seems you're that someone this time. So get the hell out of here and let me get on with it." She closed her eyes as she coughed and seemed to gasp for breath, and didn't speak again.

Natalie exited the room, leaving the door open so she could hear if Caroline called out.

In the living room, Nick was stretched out on the sofa, one arm over his eyes, the other cradling a half-full wine bottle with no label. Thinking him asleep, she turned to look for the kitchen and some coffee.

She was startled when he asked, "How is she?"

"I thought you were asleep. I was just going to get some coffee to keep me awake. Do you want some?"

"No, thank you. I never acquired a taste for coffee."

Embarrassed that she'd forgotten that small detail, she turned away from him, searching for the kitchen.

"It's through the door to your left, Nat."

When she returned, cup of coffee in hand, the bottle Nick had been cradling was nowhere to be seen, although he didn't seem to have moved an inch. She sat in the wing chair facing the sofa and sipped her coffee.

"Is there anything you can do for her?"

"Nothing but pain medication, and she refused that. I know she's your friend, and I'd rather not have to tell you this, but she's failing rapidly. There really isn't much anyone could do for her, even if we could get her to hospital."

"How long?"

"It's always hard to tell, but not very long. A few hours, perhaps a day. Fluid's building up in her lungs, and her heartbeat is very weak and erratic."

"I know— I've been listening to it for days. The sound of it follows me, and every time it falters I wonder if that's the last time." He stood and moved to face the fireplace.

"Tell me about her, Nick."

His face seemed to close, as if a mask had dropped into place. "You don't want to hear about it. It's a story that ends like all the others."

"I'm here for the duration, so tell me anyway."

"You won't be bored?"

She smiled at the thought. "I'll tell you if I get bored. Indulge me."

"That's strange. Janette said the very same thing to me the night this all began."

New York City, 1927

Janette had appeared at his door, obviously out of sorts at having to climb the stairs to the top-floor apartment.

"Why do you choose always to live in the clouds? I despise stairs."

"My humblest apologies, Janette, but I don't remember asking for your approval of my living quarters. I choose to live where I can see the sky, and the stars, and enjoy the wind blowing in through open windows. Where I can be near people, and hear them, and see them. I don't understand how you can bear to always live underground— I'd go mad if I had to live in those places again. Catacombs, basements, cellars, caves, crypts. Haven't we spent enough time hiding out in the dark through the years?"

"Perhaps you're right, Nicholah, but those dark places kept us alive more times than I care to think about. Here, I am too... exposed. I feel more secure with earth around me. It keeps the light, and... people... away."

Nick smiled sardonically. "That sort of sums up the differences between us, doesn't it? You choose to cling to the old ways, protected from the light and from life."

"*Oui*. And we know that you now disdain those ways. You aspire to more. But I warn you, again, remember that the light can be fatal to our kind." She paused, staring at him intently. "And you *are* still one of us, despite all your useless attempts to cross back over. Why do you keep trying?"

"It's obvious you'll never grasp why, so let's not open that Pandora's box again. Now, tell me, why are you here? What do you want of me now?"

She slowly and deliberately took a cigarette out of her gold case, inserted it in the holder, lit it, and blew the smoke in his direction. "Why do you assume that I want something? Perhaps I simply wanted to see an old... friend?"

"Janette, you always want something. So let's don't play games. Tell me what it is."

"I enjoy games, as you well know. You've been an entirely willing participant often enough."

At the look of irritation that crossed his face, she sighed. "Yes, I know, you don't wish to remember the past, do you? You want to live in the here and now, however boring it is." At his questioning look, she went on. "I'm bored, Nicholah. I desire amusement."

"Amusing you can be a full-time job," he sighed. "What did you have in mind this time?"

"Nothing too strenuous. Take me out on the town, as I believe they so quaintly put it in this country. See, I'm dressed for it."

She let her fur coat drop to the floor, revealing a shimmering black dress which would have been shapeless on anyone else. She pirouetted, and the jet beads caught the light as she moved.

"So tell me, what do you think?"

"I think you are as beautifully elegant as usual, but I'm not in the mood tonight. I have work to do. Can't you find someone else to amuse you? Where's your coterie of playmates?"

"I told you, I'm bored. And I'm especially bored with them. They're gauche... and... *enthusiastic*... and extremely... boring. Indulge me, Nicholah." She put out her cigarette and lit another. "But, if you choose not to attend me, I could remain here and assist you with your 'work'. Although, frankly, I can't imagine anything more boring than studying books on ancient ruins. You've lived in more than a few of these places now considered 'ancient' by mortals, so what's the point of studying them?"

Nick groaned inwardly. Janette had never understood his love of archeology, and her "help" would mean an evening of subtle, then obvious, attempts to distract him from whatever he was trying to do.

"I surrender. You've vanquished me. Again. I know how much help you'd be. Just let me go change."

"Oh, lovely, Nicholah! You know how I adore men in evening dress. *Vite, vite*!"

When he emerged from the bedroom a short time later, Janette was sitting on the piano bench, smoking and tapping her foot impatiently. "You're finally ready? Let's be off, then. I want crowds, lights, music, dancing..."

Nick smiled and moved toward the kitchen.

"Where *are* you going?"

"It's 1927, and this is New York City. America. Remember a little thing called Prohibition? That means vile liquor, probably made in someone's bathtub. I'd rather drink something that won't eat away my stomach, so I'm going to fill my flask. Would you like me to fill yours while I'm at it?"

Janette frowned. "I forget that these fools have such an idiotic law. No, thank you, I do not wish to drink anything kept in anyone's kitchen, including yours. I'm sure we can obtain something fit to drink, if you offer enough money. I do hope you have plenty of money."

"Yes, I have a sufficiency of cash, but one never knows. I'd prefer to be prepared. Be back in a moment. And while I'm gone, you could pick that very expensive fur coat up off the floor and put it back on."

As he turned to go into the kitchen, Janette stuck her tongue out at his back. "Nicholah, don't disparage my coat. Animals die every day, and you've done your share of killing."

He returned from the kitchen, putting the flask in his pocket. "So you keep reminding me. But is it necessary to flaunt death so? Or to flaunt the exorbitant amount of money that coat cost? You should know by now that it's dangerous to allow humans to know the extent of our wealth."

"Nicholah, I desire amusement, not criticism of my attire or my spending habits."

"Then I promise not to mention it again. But remember, this evening was your idea, not mine. Where do you wish to go to be amused?"

"Texas Guinan's, I think, to begin. It is loud, and crude, like this city. A good choice?"

"If crude is what you desire, then that's the place to go. Shall we?"

She took his arm as he opened the door. They went down the stairs to the sidewalk and hailed a taxi.

They were met inside the club by Guinan herself, shouting "Hello, suckers!" at the top of her voice. The place was filled with smoke, the smell of bad liquor and cheap cigars, the scent of human bodies and the perfumes used to cover their odors. Tables were pushed so close together that movement between them seemed impossible, and the tiny stage was filled with scantily-clad women dancing and attempting to sing loudly enough to be heard over the noise of the crowd.

Before they even tried to force passage through the crowd, Janette looked at Nick, shook her head "no" and retreated. Back out on the sidewalk, they both took a deep breath of the cold night air.

"I thought this was what you wanted, Janette."

"I want music, not screeching, and enough people to provide some amusement, but I do not wish to be trampled by that... herd."

"Then have you had enough for one night? May we go home now?"

"Have you no sense of adventure, Nicholah? No, let's go on."

Sighing, he motioned for her to lead the way, then took her arm as they proceeded along the crowded sidewalk. They stopped at several other clubs, none of which were to Janette's satisfaction, and eventually ended up at Helen Morgan's. After an exchange of pleasantries and cash with the headwaiter, they were seated at a small table near the stage, which held a piano and little else. They ordered drinks, but at the first sip Janette made a face.

"Don't even attempt it, *cheri*. It's loathsome. How can they drink this swill?" She opened her handbag, took out a vial, and mixed the contents with the drink.

"Are you amused yet, Janette?"

She gave him a scathing look, but before he could answer, the lights in the club dimmed and a spotlight focused on the stage. As a young man took his place at the piano, a woman stepped into the light. She wasn't beautiful— was, in fact, rather plain. Brown bobbed hair, brown eyes, tall, slightly heavy, wearing a simple black dress.

"That's not Helen," Janette hissed.

"Do you wish to leave?" Nick asked.

"No. Perhaps Helen will sing later, after this one is done."

The piano player started the intro, and the woman on the stage closed her eyes as she began to sing.

"There's a someone that I'm longing to see... "

Her voice was low and husky and hypnotic. The noise level in the club dropped immediately as every face in the audience turned to listen to her.

" ...someone to watch over me... "

Janette looked over at Nick and her heart plummeted. He had that look on his face, the look she'd seen so many times before, as if he were transfixed by this woman, as if no one else in the world existed.

No, not again. I can't bear it. Does he not care what it does to me, and to him? In an attempt to break the spell, she focused her will on him, forcing it, making it stronger and stronger. To absolutely no effect. His eyes didn't move from the singer, and his face showed no hint of the pressure she was exerting.

She gave up the attempt and sipped her drink slowly, watching him. He didn't applaud as the song ended and another started. He simply sat and stared. *He no longer even knows I'm here. This one truly has him in thrall.*

When the set ended, and the applause finally died down, he wrenched his eyes from the stage and looked around as if awakening from a trance.

"Again, Nicholah? Have you not learned by now that this is folly?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't treat me as if I were stupid. I saw the look on your face. You didn't know I was sitting at the same table as you."

"You're imagining things. Finish your drink."

"I *have* finished my drink, which you would have noticed had you been paying attention." She glared at him, rose, and stalked out of the club. He gathered up her coat, threw some money on the table, and followed. She was standing on the sidewalk in front of the club, arms crossed over her chest in the cold night air, her anger evident in the set of her face and the lines of the body. Without a word, he draped the coat around her and they moved toward the taxicab stand on the corner.

As they reached the stand, a woman in a dark coat and a cloche hat almost collided with them. "I'm so sorry, please pardon me. I'm just being clumsy as usual." The woman looked at Janette, sensed her anger, and took a step backward.

Nick moved in between the two women before Janette could speak. "No harm done. May I tell you how much I enjoyed your singing? You have an extraordinary talent."

Janette glared at them as they introduced themselves, then spat out, "Nicholah, I'm ready to go."

"Please accept my apologies, Miss—?"

"Miller."

"Miss Miller. My companion's manners leave a great deal to be desired. I hope to hear you sing again sometime."

He opened the door of the taxi and held out his hand to help Janette in. She ignored him, got in without assistance, and moved to the far side of the vehicle, where she stared stonily out the window. Nick gave the driver Janette's address, then settled back into the seat and stared out his window. They rode in silence until the taxi stopped.

Janette sat a moment, then said quietly, "Never, ever, again, apologize for me." She stepped out of the cab and turned to face him. "And don't come to me for comfort when your latest infatuation brings you grief. *Bon soir*, Nicholah." She slammed the door and vanished.

He sat quietly for a few moments, then said, "The Village, driver."

Toronto, 1993

He sighed and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips before he continued. "Janette had always been there for me before, and it was a shock when I realized she meant it this time. She withdrew from me completely. I was alone." Nick's bitterness was evident in his voice.

"Until I happened into a little place that was a bad imitation of a Parisian night club. I don't really know why I went in, except that it reminded me of other places and other times. And there was Caroline, singing love songs to a crowd of people pretending very hard to be sophisticated. And I sat and listened to her, through all three performances. And I wanted to talk to her, so I waited for her to leave."

New York City, 1928

The woman was startled when he spoke to her in the dimness of the alley behind the cafe. "Miss Miller, you probably don't remember me, but I heard you sing in Helen Morgan's club one night. I'm Nicholas Girard. You bumped into my friend, a dark-haired woman in a fur coat, at the taxi stand outside the club, and she was exceedingly rude to you."

She smiled. "Yes, I remember you. Your... friend wasn't very happy with me, or with you, as I recall."

"She's a very impatient woman." He returned the smile.

"And I'm a very hungry one. Since you obviously don't have anything better to do than sit through all three of my sets, and stand around in the alley waiting for me, why don't you make yourself useful and take me out to dinner?"

"I'd like that very much, Miss Miller. Where would you like to go?"

"My name's Caroline, and I don't care where we go, as long as wherever we go has lots of food. I'm starving. How about just walking down the street and stopping at the first place that smells good?"

"That sounds like an excellent plan to me. Lead on."

They walked along the sidewalk until they reached an Italian restaurant. Caroline stopped, inhaled deeply, and said, "This is the place. It smells delicious."

Nick demurred when it came time to order, saying he had eaten earlier, but sat and watched in awe as Caroline ate an enormous meal with obvious relish.

"Why are you staring at me? You look as if you haven't ever seen anyone eat before."

"I'm amazed that one human being could put away that much food at one time. You really were hungry, weren't you?"

"May I call you Nicky?"

"Certainly. Call me whatever you like."

"Okay, Nicky, I'll tell you my tale of woe, and then maybe you'll understand my appetite. When they raided Helen's club, they not only confiscated all the booze; they hauled off what furniture they didn't break, and they destroyed everything else in sight. And because of all the damage, the club didn't re-open, which left me without a job. In case you don't know it, singers are a dime a dozen in New York, and it isn't easy to find a place where they'll let you do what you're good at. Most of them want you to prance around in next to nothing and let the customers pinch you, because that sells more of their rotgut. That's what I loved about working for Helen— she let me do what I was best at, maybe because she's a singer herself, so she understood. She was the real draw at the club, but she couldn't hold out for three sets a night, so I filled in for her. It was fairly steady work, and I was able to give up my other job as a waitress. Then disaster struck." She gave him a questioning look. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm positive. I've lived through a few disasters myself. Please go on."

"All right. But do you think you could arrange some wine first? This is dry and dusty work."

He called the waiter over and made a deal for a bottle of wine.

"Where was I? Oh, on the brink of disaster. To continue— I was out of a job, my rent was due, and the cupboard was bare. I tried to get my old waitress job back, with no luck. So I started making the rounds of the theaters, and the clubs, and the speaks. I was about ready to try the burlesque houses when they hired me as a waitress at that pretentious little club. The owner's girlfriend, who was also the singer, got herself a new man and took off, which left them without any so-called entertainment. I stepped bravely into the breach— I wasn't exactly in demand anywhere else. It isn't much, but it's all I've got right now. And I have to pay the rent, so there's little or nothing left to feed my baser appetites for things like food and drink. So there you have it. Now aren't you sorry you asked?"

"No, I'm not. Tell me more."

"It's your turn. Tell me about you while I drink some more of this excruciatingly bad wine."

"There's nothing much to tell. Sometimes I teach, sometimes I write, sometimes I paint. Other times I just sit and stare out the window. A boring life."

"Apparently you have enough money to do exactly what you want. That doesn't sound boring to me, and I am very easily bored."

"Money isn't important."

Her irritation at his statement was evident. "That's an extremely boorish thing to say— only people who have money think it isn't important. It allows you to lead the kind of life you want."

"My life is not what I would have chosen if I had had a choice."

She stared at him with frank curiosity. "What does that mean? Why not?"

"That's my tale of woe, Caroline, which is an even more depressing tale than yours. Let's save it for another time." He looked away, but something drew his eyes back to her face.

"Well, if you won't tell me now, perhaps you'll tell me later."

"Will there will be a 'later'?" He looked at her intently.

She returned the look. "That depends."

"Upon what?"

Her face was serious as she replied. "Upon whether I like whatever else you have to say."

The intensity of the look that passed between them was broken by the waiter announcing the closing of the cafe. Out on the sidewalk again, he asked if he could escort her home, and when she agreed, they began walking toward the Village, talking, enjoying each other and the city at night.

She answered his question about what kind of songs she liked to sing best. "Love songs. Always love songs. I can and have done other things, but I don't have the right face or body for the chorus line or the theater. I'm not pretty, and I'm too tall and too heavy. But when you sing in clubs, the song is the important thing, not the singer's looks."

When he started to speak, she cut him off. "Don't tell me I'm pretty, because I'm not. I can see myself in the mirror, so don't flatter me."

"I wasn't going to. What I was going to say was that you have an extraordinary voice. Will you accept that compliment?"

She smiled. "Yes, I will. And will you accept one also?"

"I'll try."

"I like your eyes. Very much. They're very striking eyes. No, don't make a face! I'm serious." She grabbed his arm and looked into his eyes.

"Nicky, I mean it. They're very sad eyes— they look like you've seen things you'd rather not have seen. Were you in the War?"

"Yes, I've been to war. And I have seen some very unpleasant things. But let's talk about pleasant things tonight, okay?"

They continued walking, her arm in his.

"Tell me, what's the thing you'd most like to do, Caroline, if you could do anything?"

"Fly, Nicky. I'd fly."

He stopped so suddenly that, for a moment, she didn't realize he was no longer beside her. When she did, she turned to him with a questioning look.

A wide smile appeared on his face, then he laughed so loudly that other late-night passersby turned to look at him.

"What did I say? What brought this on?"

He tried to control himself long enough to speak. "You want to fly?" He erupted in laughter again.

"Yes, I do. I have ever since I saw a barnstormer back home in Toronto. What's so funny about that?"

He attempted to make his voice serious. "I can fly."

"You can? You really know how? You're not just teasing me, are you? Tell me you aren't."

"I'm perfectly serious. I learned to fly an aeroplane during the War."

"Will you teach me, Nicky? Please?"

"Yes, I will."

She ran to him, laughing, and grabbed his hands, almost dancing in her glee. Then she pulled herself closer to him, put a hand on either side of his face and kissed him. She pulled away and looked intently into his eyes. "When? When can we start?"

He wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed her, hungrily. And kissed her again. "I think we already have."

Toronto, 1993

He stopped talking, his face soft with remembrance. He got up and crossed the room to the window, looked out at the sky, and closed the drapes against the coming light.

"And I did teach her to fly. She had the nerve, the fearlessness, that you need to be a good pilot. And she was superb. She had a passion for it. As she did for music, and for life."

He went to the piano, picked up a stack of sheet music, and sat on the bench. He pulled out various pieces of music, looked at them, then put them back at the bottom of the stack. "That passion came out in her singing, as well, although she never made much of a success of her career."

"Why not, if she was that talented?"

"Because she wouldn't bend, wouldn't give in when she thought she was right. She would disagree with the club owner, and she'd either quit or get fired because she insisted on doing things her own way. She was the same way when we were together." He stopped, obviously disconcerted by what he'd just said. He looked at Nat, trying to determine her reaction to his words. She didn't seem to be upset, so he went on, hesitantly. "We're both... very stubborn people... and neither of us would give in. We had some happy years together, but we had some really bad ones as well. She was the first mortal woman I'd... been with in a long time, and the adjustment was... difficult... to say the least."

Nat thought that over for a few moments, piecing together the various bits of information that both Nick and Caroline had spoken. So they had been more than just friends. Nick was telling her that they'd been lovers? How was that possible? *Well, here goes—I guess the only way to find out is to ask.* "But you... worked it out?"

"No, Nat, we didn't. You know what I am, so you know that I couldn't trust myself not to hurt her. Or kill her." He stopped for a moment, visibly embarrassed, then looked up at her. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Yes, she understood. She wished she didn't, but she understood. She tried to keep her expression calm and cool. "I think I get the general idea."

"Yeah." He paused for a moment, then continued talking. "We were together on and off for years, until she got too sick to work. And then she got too sick to take care of herself, although she wouldn't admit it. Both her parents were gone by then, and she told me that she wanted to move back to Toronto, to the house where she, and her mother, had been born. To this house. She was trying to ease me out of her life. She joked about not wanting me to see her in her 'declining years,' as she put it. So she moved here, and then I came to help take care of her. She wouldn't let me move in, because it was too painful for her when people assumed I was her son, rather than her lover. But no matter what other people thought, and no matter how we aged or didn't age, neither of us ever lost the passion we had for one another."

He stopped and rubbed his face with his hands. When he didn't resume, she prompted him.

"And?"

"And then this."

"Nick, if you're almost eight hundred years old, surely the problem's come up before with people you've... loved, hasn't it? How do you deal with it?"

"You just live with the pain and you go on. And you lie to yourself that it'll never happen again. That you'll never allow it to happen again. And then it does."

They took turns sitting with Caroline throughout the day, sleeping when they could. When sundown arrived, Nick was asleep on the sofa, and Nat sat in a rocking chair next to Caroline's bed, rocking and listening to her reminisce between bouts of exhausted sleep.

"Natalie, you can't imagine what life was like then. Radio. Talkies. Model A's. Did you know that Nicky taught me how to drive? And how to fly? We even met Lindbergh once, at some horribly boring reception. I idolized him. I have a photograph of the three of us somewhere— tell Nicky to find it for you. He'll know where it is."

"You should get some rest now. You're tiring yourself with all this talking."

"So? What else do I have to do? It pleases me to talk. Nicky used to tell me to stop talking and take a breath every once in a while. But he always listened. That's one of the things I loved most about him. He listened to me talk, and he listened to me sing, and I even got him to join in sometimes, the singing, that is. He has a beautiful voice." She closed her eyes and her smile faded.

"Other things weren't so beautiful, though. Because of what he is, the physical side of things wasn't always so pleasant."

"Caroline, no, I don't want to hear this... "

"Oh, for God's sake, *Doctor* Lambert, grow up. The body and its needs are a part of life, mortal or otherwise. You're old enough to know that. Love with Nicky was an act on the edge— sometimes immensely pleasurable, but too frustrating to be truly satisfactory. And always, always, extremely dangerous. Control is all, and a loss of control can mean death, literally."

She sighed, then continued. "That's what drove us apart. I always wanted more of him, and he was always afraid of losing control. He would sate himself on that stuff he drinks, trying to dull his hunger, and then we would begin to make love. The pleasure would be incredible, but then we would have to stop, because his final pleasure might have killed me. Or made me into what he is. The frustration drove us both mad. So when it became too much, one or the other of us would just leave. Him, to put some distance between us for my safety and his sanity. Me, for my so-called career. We sometimes spent years apart— I'd take a job in Detroit, or Chicago, or Montreal. He'd be off on a new adventure, teaching or writing, or off on some dig. The war years were the really hard ones, with me always wondering if he'd gone off and gotten himself killed. Or worse. And then he'd show up on my doorstep again, and we'd take up where we left off. What brought us together in the first place would bring us together again. But then the same old conflicts would drive us apart, and he would go to Janette, and I'd go to other men. It was a tortured way to live."

Chicago, 1951

They were in the midst of yet another argument.

"Caroline, stop it. I can't go through this anymore. Why won't you just stop?"

"Don't give me that. I've heard it all before, and it's just as maddening now as it was in the beginning. Remember that first night? Remember what you told me?"

"Of course I do. I warned you— I told you what I was."

"Yes, you warned me. You told me that you needed blood for sustenance, and that you were a thing of the dark and of the night. You said that you were evil, a creature without a soul and beyond any hope of redemption. And I didn't believe you then and I still don't. You aren't evil. How many times do I have to say it to convince you?"

"It makes no difference how many times you say it— I'm still that same creature— I still need blood to live. And I still can hurt you. You refuse to believe the very obvious evidence of your own body. Look at your arms. *Look.* Look at what I've done to you." He held out her arms, staring at the scars.

"It was with my permission, Nicky. I was terrified that first time, but I wanted you so badly that I would have done anything. Anything." She moved closer to him. "And I'm trying to telling you that nothing has changed. I still want you just that badly."

He kissed her, and then held her tightly, his breath moving strands of her hair. "*Et moi, aussi,* Caro."

He pulled back so he could see her face. "And that's what's tearing me apart. I'm afraid I won't be able to stop. I don't want to hurt you anymore. You bear the scars, not me. You're the one who's in danger. Of your life."

She extricated herself from his embrace, turning away from him. When she spoke, there was bitterness in her voice.

"And you don't have any scars? Your soul is unblemished?"

"I don't *have* a soul. LaCroix took it from me, along with my life and my hope. Why do you refuse to accept that?"

"Because you've never understood that you're wrong— a creature without a soul couldn't love. And you do love me. I have no doubts about that. If you didn't, we wouldn't be having this argument again."

"And again, and again. How many times have we had it? And we never come to a conclusion that we can live with."

"I'm perfectly willing to live with the danger. I always have been. You're the one who's too obstinate to be moved."

"That's because I'm the one who has to put on the brakes. And it's getting more and more difficult to do that."

"I know that, Nicky, but—"

He interrupted her. "But what? Caro, this is useless. We go in circles and we get nowhere."

Her voice was soft as she spoke. "Wouldn't it be lovely if life were simple? I dream sometimes about it sometimes, and then I wake up crying."

"That's a dream of *mortal* life, and we both know it's just a dream, despite all my failed attempts to make it otherwise."

"They haven't worked yet, but I know you very well indeed— you'll keep trying, no matter how often you fail. I don't know if it'll ever happen, but do you know what gives me nightmares?"

"I have a fairly good idea. I have them myself."

"I have nightmares that you *will* become mortal again someday, and that I won't be here to see it. I'm 45 years old, I've got crow's-feet and my hair's beginning to gray, and I'm beginning to get wrinkles, and I'm aging every day. Soon people are going to think I'm your mother, and then, in a few more years, they'll think I'm your grandmother. And then what will we do? Will you still love me then?"

"I offered you immortality, Caroline, and you said no."

"I'd like to have seen the look on your face if I'd said yes. You knew I would refuse before you offered me the 'gift' of immortality. And you know why. I can see the torment your kind of life has given you. Some gift!"

"Listen to yourself. You want all of me, that's what you keep telling me. Well, you know what I am, and what I have to do to live. I can't give you all of myself without making you like me. And neither of us wants that to happen."

They were both silent for a few moments, then Caroline spoke. "So where do we go from here?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know."

Toronto, 1993

Caroline sighed. "And he was right, Natalie. We did go in circles, and we never did find a solution to the problem. Except separation."

"Do you know what the hardest part is? No, of course you don't— you're young. He's young. And he stays young, forever. And you get older, and older, and the body goes, and the mind starts to go. But you have no idea how much it hurts, even after all this time, to look at him and realize that he looks exactly like he did the night I met him. Not a moment older."

She paused, then put out her hand to Natalie. "It's hard, very hard. You want to think about that, because it's the most difficult part of loving him. You age and you die, and he doesn't. It's as simple, and as complicated, as that. And it colors everything. Everything.

"The time will come, perhaps sooner than you think, when you'll have to face the same decisions I did. He's not an easy man to love. He's a man who is scarred by his anger and his guilt, and he can hurt you so easily when his control slips. He'll regret it later, but he can and will hurt you, emotionally if not physically.

"That's the reason I never hated Janette. I resented her, and was jealous of her, but I couldn't hate her. He could let down his guard with her, and truly be himself, without fear of hurting her. Something he couldn't, or wouldn't, allow himself to do with me. She was there for him when he needed her."

"I thought Nick said Janette cut him out of her life?"

"Oh, she did tell him to get lost. But we both know that he has ties to Janette that are very strong. They get stretched and knotted and torn, but they're never completely broken. It didn't take long for him to get back into her good graces. You know how easily he can do that, even without really trying. The problem is that he's so naive about the women in his life— he puts them up on that proverbial pedestal, and then is devastated when they either fall or step off. I usually fell off, out of carelessness or ignorance or stubbornness. And then he'd go to Janette, who didn't give him time to elevate her to the pedestal. And if he had, she would probably have jumped off on purpose, just to keep him interested. And whatever else I may think of her, she did keep our secret from LaCroix. You do know about him, don't you?" At a nod from Nat, she went on. "Nicky lived in fear that LaCroix would find out about our relationship and put an end to it one way or another. But Janette helped him hide me. She loves him that much, and apparently has done so for more years than I care to think about." She coughed, caught her breath, and continued.

"He did offer me his kind of life once. I think everyone believes in some sort of immortality for themselves, either through their faith, or their children, or their words, or their music. But I could see what immortality had done, and was doing, to him, and I refused his offer. I felt that a mortal lifetime with him was enough. He says I'm one of those strong-willed women whose heart is ruled by her head, but I don't know if he's right about that. You have to be strong to love him. And, Natalie, I recommend it highly."

Caroline closed her eyes, and Natalie rocked, watching her face, thinking she had drifted off to sleep again. She was startled when Caroline spoke again, in a whisper.

"Are you the one who'll bring him back into the light?"

Nick raised himself from his reclining position on the sofa, swung his legs to the floor, and rubbed his face with his hands.

"You look like hell, my friend," Natalie said as she entered the living room.

"Yeah, well, those are the breaks. No rest for the weary." He sighed, then ran his fingers through his hair. "You should get some sleep yourself. You have to be all in, too." He stood and stretched.

"That sounds wonderful, but I *think* I'm too *tired*."

"You won't be much good to anyone if you're asleep on your feet. If you won't go home, at least stretch out on the sofa and get some rest."

"Okay. But call me if Caroline needs me. I'll be right here."

"How's she doing?"

"Not good. She's getting weaker. She's sleeping for short periods, but it's not doing her any good. Her heart's just giving out."

He started toward the staircase, then stopped and turned. "You know how much I appreciate your being here, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. Go on up. I'll be fine." He nodded, and she watched him climb the stairs and disappear into the bedroom. She went over to the sofa, hesitated, then kicked off her shoes and stretched out. She could hear him talking softly upstairs, and the sound of his voice and her weariness combined to make her eyes close and her body relax. She slept in spite of herself, and dreamed of music.

She was awakened hours later by a sound she couldn't quite place. She opened her eyes and lifted her head, straining to hear. It sounded like singing. From upstairs.

She got up and quietly climbed the stairs. It definitely was singing. She looked in the door of the bedroom. Nick was sitting on the bed, Caroline in his arms, his cheek against hers, his eyes closed as he sang softly. "Someone to watch over... " And then his voice broke. Caroline's eyes were closed, her body still, her chest no longer rising and falling.

The look on his face was more than she could take. She backed quickly and quietly away from the door, and went downstairs. She wandered around the living room, looking at the mementos of the life Nick and Caroline had had together. A photograph of them in a nightclub, both in 50's clothing, smiling at one another. A millefiore paperweight. A "Cabaret" soundtrack album. A book by Dorothy Parker. Another by Kerouac. A small framed watercolor of a sunflower. A coffee mug filled with seashells.

Holding the paperweight in her hand, gazing into its miniature glass flowers, she heard the door of the bedroom close, and turned to see Nick moving slowly down the stairs. She put the paperweight back down on the table, being careful not to make a sound.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "It's over."

"I'm sorry. I know she meant a lot to you."

He stood perfectly still a few moments, staring at her, then said in a thick voice, "Yes, she did."

Natalie hesitated, then said: "Would you like me to... make the... arrangements?"

"Yes. I don't think... Yes. She wanted to be cremated. I... Thank you."

"I'll just go up and... then I'll start making calls." She touched his arm as she passed him, unsure of what else to do to comfort him.

Upstairs, she started to straighten the bedclothes when she noticed small red dots on Caroline's nightgown and the sheets. *What...? They look like drops of blood. She wasn't bleeding. How'd they get there?* Puzzled, she stared at the spots uncomprehendingly, but then, suddenly, the answer came to her. *Dear God... they're tears. They're Nick's tears.*

Shaken, she sat heavily on the edge of the bed, staring at the drops, then at Caroline's face. "I've never seen him cry, Caroline. I didn't know if he could. But he cried for you."

She stared at the still face a few moments longer, then went to find clean linens and a fresh nightgown. She changed the bed linens and Caroline's gown, washed her face, and smoothed back her hair. After straightening up the room a bit, she picked up her bag and stood at the side of the bed, gazing at Caroline once more.

"I don't know that I could bear the kind of half-life you had with him. I just don't know. But I'll do my best to take care of him."

As she stood looking at the woman's face, she heard a crash from downstairs. Then another, and another. She ran to the top of the stairs and looked down.

"Nick? Nick, what's going on?" She winced as she heard a bellow of rage and the sound of breaking glass. She started down the stairs, and had to duck near the bottom as a photograph in a silver frame came flying by her.

"Nick! What are you doing?"

The only answer was the sound of something solid hitting the wall. She advanced cautiously to the door of the living room and peered in, looking on in alarm as she saw Nick sweep his arm across the top of the piano, scattering its contents across the room. A kick to the piano stool made sheets of music flutter around him like snow. The sounds of his rage echoed in the room, and the look on his face and the glowing yellow of his eyes made her heart pound loudly.

"Nick, stop this! Get control of yourself! STOP IT!"

He didn't acknowledge her presence. He knocked over a lamp, picked up a porcelain vase from the mantle and smashed it into the fireplace. Then he moved to the bookshelves and began pulling books off, throwing them so hard that a couple of them dented the wall, screaming "No!" so loudly that it hurt her ears.

"NICK! STOP! DON'T DO THIS!"

She moved to the left, raising her arms to protect her face from a flying book, only to be struck on the hand by another one. The pain made her drop to her knees, her left hand cradling the right to her chest.

"DAMN YOU! STOP IT! YOU HIT ME!" She looked up to see him standing in the middle of the room, panting, his body trembling, the glazed look slowly receding from his eyes, the yellow color fading to blue.

Gaining control of himself, he moved towards her, reaching for her hand. She instinctively drew back from him, still not sure that the storm had passed. A stricken look crossed his face when she drew away.

"*Merde.* I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"Are you crazy? Of course you hurt me— that book must have been moving at warp speed. It hurts like hell."

"Can you move your fingers?"

She tried, gingerly. "Yeah, it hurts, but I can move them."

"Come sit down. I'll fix an icepack to keep the swelling down. Can I help you up?"

"Yes, you can, if you're sure you're through with your fit."

"I'm done. I promise. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just... lost it. It won't happen again."

"It better not, or I'm out of here." This time she allowed him to help her up. He settled her on the sofa, her back against the arm, and lifted her feet up.

"I'm truly sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"If you'll explain to me what that was all about."

"I don't know if I can."

"Try."

"I... it's just that... I loved her, and I couldn't do anything to help her. Just like always." He turned away from her.

"Dying is a part of life, Nick."

"It's a part of mortal life. But I'm not mortal, and I'm the one who gets left behind. Again and again."

"You knew that when you got involved with her, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. But it's a hard lesson to learn, and I was never very good at lessons. LaCroix wouldn't win any awards for his teaching, either."

Natalie's irritation showed in her voice. "I don't think you can blame this on LaCroix or anyone else. You knew what you were doing, and you knew how it would end. So take the responsibility yourself."

"Caroline knew what I was. I told her at the beginning."

"Oh, that's just great— you *told* her. And just how did telling her help? It couldn't have been very good preparation for what life with you would really be like."

"Nobody knows what life with another person is like until they experience it, do they? Don't judge me, Nat. You don't know anything about Caroline and me."

"Excuse me? I've been here listening to both of you talk for more than a few hours. I think I know more about it than you realize. So listen to me— Caroline said listening was one of your better traits."

Nick glared at her. "Okay, I'm listening. But if you don't mind, could you hurry it up a bit? I'd like to go home."

"Then listen to me very carefully, Nick. Caroline said that you carried the scars of your immortality, and that they influenced every part of your life together. You're angry now because she left you, and you're feeling guilty that you couldn't do anything about it. I understand that, but don't let her death create new scars, because they toughen you, and make you less sensitive, and eventually you don't feel anything at all any more. She deserves better than to be the cause of that, don't you think?"

Nick didn't respond, although as she watched his face, she could see the conflicts of his emotions. He turned away from her and looked at the litter on the floor, then bent down and started picking up the sheets of music.

"Nick, talk to me."

Again, he didn't respond.

"You need to talk, to work through the grief process. You can't just keep it bottled up."

"Don't recite Psychology 101 to me. I know all about the grief process. I've gone through it more times than you can imagine. I'll work it out my own way."

"Oh, will you? Your way doesn't seem to have worked very well, as far as I can tell. All you've done is destroy this room."

"Just drop it, okay, Nat? I don't want to hear about the flaws in my character right now."

"That's not what I'm trying to do and you know it."

"Then what is it you're trying to do, pray tell?"

She took a deep breath and tried to still her own anger. "What I'm trying to tell you is that this is what life *is* for mortals— it's disappointment, and pain, and frustration, and death. You say you want to be mortal again— well, welcome to mortality. Everyone you love dies, sooner or later."

Nick stopped his pretense of cleaning up, stared at the papers in his hand, then threw them against the fireplace. "Then the hell with mortality. It hurts too much."

His face crumpled and he fell to his knees, rocking back and forth, his arms wrapped around his midsection as if trying to hold himself together. She moved across the room to him and bent down to comfort him. His arms enfolded her and he held on to her as if he were drowning.

"It's okay, Nick. It'll be okay."

When he loosened his grip on her, she moved to sit down beside him on the floor, and he took her hand.

"Ow! Don't! That's the hand you smashed."

"I'm truly sorry about that. I don't ever want to hurt you again."

She smiled at him and held out the other hand. "Then here, hold this one. It's just itching to be held."

He took it and held it to his cheek. "Yes, ma'am."

He looked around the room and sighed. "I seem to leave a wake of destruction wherever I go, don't I?"

"Or a wake of litter, anyway." At last a smile crossed his face.

"Listen up, you. I've seen your office and your apartment— don't get on my case about being neat and tidy, if you don't mind."

"Yeah, you're right about that— I just can't ever seem to get things organized. But this mess really needs some order, doesn't it?"

"Definitely. Where shall we start?"

"What's this 'we' stuff? I'm wounded, remember? I'll supervise and you can do the work."

He smiled again. "That's what I was afraid you were going to say." He got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. "I'll get some ice for your hand and then you can order me about at will."

While he was working, she started making the necessary phone calls. When they were both done, the paperwork had been completed, and Caroline's body had been removed, they stood wearily in the living room.

"Let's go home, Nick. We can arrange the memorial service after we both get some sleep."

He nodded, put on his jacket, and turned to look around the room once more. He picked up the box of photographs he wanted to keep, then moved to the table beside the sofa and touched the paperweight.

"This was the first gift I ever gave her. She was fascinated by it. She'd sit for hours looking into it, trying to figure out how something so beautiful could be made from something as hard and brittle and cold as glass. Would you accept it as a remembrance of her?"

"Yes, I would. Thank you."

The sky was beginning to lighten as he opened the front door. "Well, are we done here?"

"Yes, I suppose we are. You need to get home before sunrise."

"Yeah. Thank you, Natalie, for everything you did for her."

"No need. Let's go home."

As they started out the door, she stopped. "I just remembered something I left upstairs. You go on, and I'll lock up and be right behind you."

"Okay, if you're sure."

"I'm sure. Bye."

He held her a moment, kissed her cheek, and then got into his car and drove away. She walked back into the house and went directly to the phone. She picked up the receiver, then put it back down. "I'm probably going to really regret this later." She picked up the receiver again and punched in the numbers quickly, before she could change her mind.

"Janette? Natalie Lambert. I apologize for calling at such an odd hour, but I thought you needed to know that Caroline Miller died a few hours ago."

She listened to the voice on the other end of the line, then said, "Yes, I know. He just left. I think it might be a good idea if you were there when he gets home. Yeah, bye."

She put the receiver down gently, turned and left the house, and went home to Sydney.

— The End —

No Excuse for Not Flossing

by M.J. Farrell

On a dark, stormy night... or was that Knight?... an amateur writer was bopping hither and yon through her favourite mailing list, VAMPYRES, when she came across a reference to a new show. Intrigued, she asked questions, and was introduced to the world of Forever Knight! *Salivating for episodes, she came across an e-angel who sent her tapes! After viewing these, our heroine was completely addicted, and summarily joined both FK mailing lists to get more, more, MORE! She fell in LOVE with the fanfic, and, inspired by a wonderfully witty discussion as to whether or not Nick EVER picks up those corks he throws around, she came up with the story before you.*

The Cadillac cruised along the street, stopping in front of Schanke's house.

"Thanks for the lift, partner. Sure you don't want to come in for some pizza?" Schanke waved the box in front of Nick's nose.

"Ack! No thanks!" Nick's voice sounded muffled.

"Wazza matter with you tonight?" Schanke said, standing by the car and sneaking a pepperoni and some cheese into his mouth.

"Just a little... uh... toothache, that's all."

"No problem! Myra's cousin's a dentist! Great guy!" Schanke started fishing in his pockets and came up with a crumpled card. "Tell him who sent you and he'll give you a discount! We've got a deal!"

"Uh... no, thanks," Nick said, pushing away the offered card, "I'll just take something for it. It'll be okay."

"Come ON, Knight! The big, bad detective isn't afraid of the dentist!?" Schanke chuckled as he leaned against the car.

"It ISN'T that serious, and DON'T LEAN ON THE CADDY!"

Schanke scrambled to his feet and nearly upset the pizza box. "Okay, okay! Listen, I gotta go before the pizza gets cold. Will you at least take the card?" He offered it again.

Nick sighed. "All right! But I'm sure it's nothing!" He took the card, put in his pocket and watched Schanke walk up the path to his house. Actually, it WAS something. He didn't know what happened, but ever since he woke up today his tooth hurt like... like... he didn't know WHAT it hurt like, it had been a *long* time since he'd experienced severe pain of *any* kind, much less a toothache. It wasn't getting any better and painkillers wouldn't do any good. He stopped at a red light and dialed a familiar number.

"County Coroner's Office."

"Uh... Nat?"

Pause. "Okay...what's wrong now? What've you done to yourself?" She sounded almost resigned. Nick smiled but winced as he did so.

"Done to myself? *Done* to myself? What makes you think I *did* anything to myself? Can't I just call up a dear friend to see how she is?"

"Yeah, right! Ok, Nick... where were you shot? How many bullets are there... and why does your voice sound funny?"

"Ahh... um... you're not going to believe this."

"Try me, Nick. Remember me? I believe in a *lot* of strange things! What's going ON?"

"Would you believe I've got a toothache?"

Another pause. "What's the punchline?"

"I'm serious, Nat! My tooth is killing me!"

"Uh... well... ah, I've got a cousin who's a dentist! He has a night clinic!"

"Great!" Nick said sarcastically, wondering if everyone in the universe was related to a dentist. "How do I explain *where* it is?"

"You mean ...?"

"Oh yes... in front... up in front... *way* up in front! I've had it since I woke up today and — are you *giggling*, Nat!?"

"Absolutely NOT!" Natalie recovered herself. The idea of a vampire with a fang-ache had been a little much for her sense of humour to handle. "Well I guess I can take a look at it. I'm no dentist, Nick!"

"Why, Dr. Lambert, are you admitting there's something you can't do? I'll be there in five minutes!" Nick hung up before Natalie could retort.

Natalie looked at the telephone receiver in her hand and fought to keep from smiling. Nick could always get the better of her in a verbal battle. Well, he'd had a lot longer to practice. Nick had a toothache. Nick had a toothache? She definitely wanted him to be more human, and having a toothache *was* human, but she'd had something else in mind! She checked her watch, Nick should be there any second. She turned to Grace, her assistant. "Did you want to take your dinner break now, Grace?" she said.

Grace looked up in surprise. Natalie had said she wanted these specimens tested right away. Her surprise was momentary, however, as she glanced out the window and saw Natalie's friend, Detective Knight, pull up. She smiled as Natalie went into the other room. She'd often wondered about those two. Natalie claimed they were just friends but Grace had seen the way they looked at each other sometimes when the other wasn't looking. What the heck! If Natalie wanted her to be scarce, she'd be scarce! Far be it from her to stand in the way of True... whatever it was! Grace got her purse and started towards the door.

"See you in an hour! Why, Detective Knight," she said as Nick came into the Corner's Office, "what a surprise!" She was still smiling as she walked out of the office.

Nick looked at Grace's retreating form and turned and lifted one eyebrow at Natalie. Natalie shrugged her shoulders and motioned him to follow her into the inner room. "Hop up and we'll see what we have here."

She motioned towards the main feature of the room, a large stainless steel table. Nick lifted both eyebrows at her. "Oh, come *on*, it's not like you've never *been* on one!" They both laughed as they remembered their first meeting. Nick had been just another one of Natalie's cadavers ... until he'd opened his eyes. Nick hopped up, and Natalie got out a small, portable light.

"Uh... Nick? How exactly are we going to *do* this? After all, right now the area in question is... uh... retracted?"

"Yeah... I was thinking about that. I'm not sure what I can do about that..." He looked thoughtful.

"Well," Natalie said with a grin, "I could always hit you with a chair or something until you vamped out, and then take a quick look!"

Nick groaned, "Don't even *joke*, Natalie!" He didn't like to "vamp out" around Natalie, he was afraid what would happen. He was afraid for her. That was why anything between them was... unlikely — not impossible, he couldn't stand the thought of the word "impossible" — just... unlikely.

Natalie seemed to sense part of what he was thinking. "Sorry... bad joke. Let me just take a look now and see what I can see. If I can't find anything— what do the others do?"

"As far as I know, I'm the first one with a toothache! If you can't find anything, I'll go ask around the Raven. Maybe one of the other vampires has a cousin who's a dentist!"

"Ummm... what?" Natalie looked up from adjusting the portable light.

"Never mind... stupid joke."

Natalie finally got the light on the right setting. "Okay, now lie down, open wide, and *stop talking*!"

"Yes, Doctor!" Nick replied with a grin, and did as he was told.

Natalie shone the light in his mouth and peered inside. "Hmmm. Hmmmm? Hmmmm!"

"Aht izz it? Aht oo ou zee?"

"Stop talking!" Natalie ordered, reaching for a pair of tweezers.

She'd better finish soon, Nick thought. He wasn't used to her being this close to him. He could smell the perfume she always wore, and see how big her beautiful eyes really were. *Cut it out, Nick!* the voice inside of his head rang out. *Think of something else!*

Seemingly oblivious to Nick's discomfort, Natalie continued to work with the tweezers and the light. "Ah-ha, got you!"

She withdrew both instruments and turned to the main light, to examine what she'd taken from Nick's mouth. Nick sat up and rubbed the side of his face. It felt *much* better. He got off the table and stood next to Natalie. She turned to him with a bemused expression on her face. "Nick? Do you own a corkscrew?"

"A corkscrew? Uh... I dunno... maybe. Why?"

Natalie turned so that the object being held by the tweezers was visible. "'Cause if you don't, I suggest you *get* one!" She dropped a tiny part of a wine cork into his open hands. Nick closed his eyes. The memory of last night came back to him. He'd been angry about work and instead of spitting out the cork whole, like he normally did, he'd chomped down on it until he'd split it!

He opened his eyes to see that Natalie couldn't contain herself any longer and was leaning against the table laughing. In a minute, he joined her.

— The End —

Heart of Darkness

by Karin Welss

I've always been intrigued about LaCroix's origins. Here's my attempt at explaining who he might have been as a mortal, and why he ended up the way he did....

Sharibet appears courtesy of Marian Huntsman Gibbons.

Toronto, 1992. Just after "Dark Knight"

LaCroix took to the air, unnoticed, as Nick's apartment burned behind him. The image of Nick, his back turned while he cradled the foolish mortal woman, seared like acid across his consciousness, the pain of betrayal worse than the marks left by the stake and the flames.

Nick had done the unthinkable— rebelled openly against his master, and tried to kill him. Eight centuries of companionship, of loyalty, all destroyed for a mere mortal. LaCroix could still taste her blood on his lips as he hurtled silently through the cold Toronto night, seeking protection from the approaching sunrise.

Shelter at last, gained with his last bit of strength. LaCroix lay in his bed, immobilized by the twin onslaughts of wood and fire. He grimaced silently at the stained patterns on the ceiling above him. *Won't Nicholas be surprised when he finds that his darling museum curator has been granted her wish for immortality?*

Poor Nicholas, pinning his hopes on a dream of becoming mortal again: *You'd hate it, my boy. But you won't discover that until it's too late. You never did know what you wanted.*

Then, too weak to resist the coming dawn, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep despite the pain, despite the wounds inflicted by betrayal. And he drifted into troubling dreams, as millenia-old memories rose again to haunt him...

Pergamon, Asia Minor. ca. 340 BC

If anyone had been awake to see it, they would have seen a small, fair-haired boy slip cautiously from his room like a prisoner escaping from a cell. A quick glance across the courtyard, baking in the late spring sun, assured him that no one was about.

The shabby little house was silent in the noonday siesta. A gentle snore issued from the doorkeeper's alcove in the vestibule, and the boy Menelaos grinned mischievously. With only two slaves left in the household, there was no one to reprimand him for creeping around when he should be napping.

Father sold Old Nurse, the bossy slave woman, last year. Menelaos had been secretly relieved to see her go— he had never grown to like her the way he had liked Young Nurse. Young Nurse died of the fever when—Menelaos frowned, and shied away from the memory.

Best of all, Father was not at home. Menelaos had learned to fear his father, especially when he returned with the stink of wine sour upon his breath. It hadn't always been like this. When Mother was alive, Father was rarely in a black mood. And Mother could always calm his rage. Menelaos wished he had the same talent. The bruises and weals, livid on his fair skin, testified otherwise.

Assured that the doorkeeper was indeed asleep, Menelaos tiptoed past the vestibule, across the courtyard, and headed into forbidden territory.

A brief dash, and then he was there, gasping a little in the dim, shadowed coolness. His heart was pounding with excitement and exhilaration as he looked around his mother's room. Everything was still exactly as it was the day she died, only a little dusty now. The lone remaining slave girl who served as the housekeeper had a hard enough time keeping clean the rooms of the living. The rooms dedicated to the dead received only cursory attention.

Menelaos stood frozen in the middle of the room, overwhelmed by the fact that he had directly defied his father for the first time in his life. Then, as the minutes passed, and lightening did not strike him down, his heartbeat slowed and his natural curiosity took over. The room smelled faintly musty and dusty, and Menelaos felt tears of bitter disappointment rising in his eyes. His senses strained for some echo of his mother's lingering presence, but even her scent was gone. This was a dead shrine, uninhabited by the presence it honored.

Almost without volition, the boy was standing in front of a small chest of precious inlaid wood. He lifted the lid, and suddenly the room came to life again, inhabited by the ghosts of cedar and sandalwood. A small white stone jar carved with handles in the shape of lotuses nestled next to tiny vials of imported glass and small terracotta pots of rouge and kohl. Memory stirred, and Menelaos reached out.

First, he cradled a tarnished bronze mirror wrapped in dyed cotton cloth. The back was engraved with a scene from the Odyssey, depicting Penelope at her loom. Mother used to let him hold the mirror while her maid dressed her hair, telling him the most wonderful stories while the bright ribbons wove swiftly through her golden curls. He remembered the stories very clearly, brave heroes and terrifying monsters, but without her, the mirror was just a dead metal object. Disappointed, he replaced it in the chest, and picked up the white alabaster jar instead.

His hand fit neatly around its cool shape, and strangely comforted, he drew the carved wooden stopper out. And suddenly, she was there again, conjured forth from the land of the dead by the spicy, faintly musky Egyptian perfume she used to wear.

Soundlessly, his lips shaped the precious word they had not spoken for two years: "Mother."

Menelaos saw a movement at the extreme edge of his peripheral vision. Could it be—?

"What are you doing, boy?!" The angry bellow filled the little room, driving away the friendly memories.

Menelaos jumped with startled guilt, and the alabaster jar slipped from between his nerveless fingers. The sound, as it shattered against the floor tiles, was shockingly loud. And the room was filled with the scent of Egypt, overpowering and foreign now.

He turned around, blue eyes wide in a white face, to face the avenging demon named Father. A step backwards, and a fragment of the shattered jar bit his heel with sharp stone teeth.

"I thought I forbade you to pollute this room with your presence!" Father's fist sent Menelaos reeling, black stars exploding dizzily across the field of his vision.

Another blow followed the first, and another. And another. Menelaos crumpled at the foot of Mother's bed with a gasp. He knew better than to cry out, even when a large sandaled foot smashed painfully into his ribs.

Between blows, he railed at his son in a voice thick with rage, grief, and contempt: "You miserable little puppy! How dare you defy me! You killed them, both of them, with the plague you brought to this house."

"I didn't mean to..." Menelaos knew it was a mistake to speak, but couldn't help himself. He hadn't intended for Mother and his older brother Laertes to catch the fever, too.

"I loved them!" howled his father, raining tears and blows impartially on his only remaining son.

"Don't you love me, Father?" whimpered the nine-year-old boy, cowering in a corner between the bed and the wall, futilely trying to shield himself from Father's fists and feet.

"Love you? Love you? How could I love you!" replied Father. "The gods were cruel when they stole away Hermione and Laertes, and crueller yet when they left me burdened with *you*. If only you had died instead of them!"

Having delivered a harsher blow that any from his fist, Father was suddenly gone, headed for the neighborhood taverna and the comforting warmth found at the bottom of a jug of unwatered wine.

Back at the house, a long time passed before the boy's shoulders stopped shaking. Menelaos came slowly, cautiously, out of his crouch. His forehead felt curiously numb and stiff. He raised a hand to touch it, and his fingers came away sticky with blood.

Dry-eyed now, and full of implacable rage, he stared in the direction of the door.

"I hate you!" he whispered fiercely. "I hate you I hate you I hate you!"

Five years later

The bright chords of a lyre sounded in the cool air of early morning, drifting effortlessly over the high walls that shielded the house of Laertes the furniture maker from the unpaved street. Women, hurrying to the market while the vegetables and fish were still fresh, paused briefly to listen, and then continued on their way, smiling.

Behind the blank glower of the walls, Menelaos sat alone in the shade of the modest colonnade that ran around the interior of the courtyard. He was playing a dancing air on his cheap little lyre, giddy with the praise he had received yesterday.

Menelaos had discovered several months previously that he could earn a few coppers by playing for the vendors and customers in the Agora on market days. More important than the small sums of money, however, was the chance it gave him to practice, away from Father's disapproving glare and cutting remarks.

His fingers plucked the strings with a joyful flourish as he summoned forth the precious memory yet again: Amyntias, the noted flutist, had stopped to listen to him while he played in the Agora yesterday afternoon, and smiling widely in approval with what he had heard, had said to Menelaos:

"You should save those coins thrown in your basket to pay for proper music lessons, boy— my ears can hear that the gods have given you a precious gift, but my eyes can see that you're at least twelve or thirteen years old— almost too old to start learning, if you want to be the best."

Astonished by the compliment, Menelaos had gathered up his courage, and asked shyly: "Do you really think I might be a good musician, someday, honored sir?"

"If you practice, and if you study with the right master, you could be better than good, you might be a great musician, boy," replied Amyntias. "But do not wait too long. Your talent will wither away, like a fruit left too long unplucked, if you do not cherish it."

But Amyntias' words were bitter as well as sweet. Menelaos knew full well that he couldn't afford to pay a music master for lessons. The paltry sums that he earned from playing in the Agora were secretly given to the household's one remaining slave, for the purchase of food.

In the last five years, it seemed that Father only appeared long enough to exercise his authority over Menelaos with fists and feet, and then he vanished again. He claimed to be working from dawn to dusk to put food in the mouths of his greedy slave and idle son, but Menelaos, no fool, had figured out the truth a long time ago. Which was that Father started living in the taverna when Mother died.

Father's business, never really prosperous, had steadily declined as he sank deeper into the seductive embrace of the wine jug. Now, the household subsisted on the occasional orders and repairs steered his way by Father's old companions, supplemented by the meagre store of coins earned with Menelaos' lyre.

The thought of food brought Menelaos's fingers to an abrupt halt. Lost in pleasant reverie, the morning had fled. The sun was almost directly overhead, and Father would be home any minute for his midday meal.

All unawares to Menelaos, Laertes the Elder had been standing in the vestibule for some time, listening to the sweet notes, watching a golden head bent in concentration, the profile so like Hermione's. Hermione— even after all these years, the pain of her loss was still razor-sharp. How dare his worthless son remind him of the wife who was everything to him? Suddenly the boy stopped the music, and looked around, guiltily.

In the sudden silence, Laertes stepped forward into the courtyard and spoke, his voice harsh with resentment: "So, I come home once again to find my fine, idle son playing with his toy."

Menelaos looked up, the happiness in his face immediately shuttered behind his usual sullen glower. And Laertes the Elder was relieved to see the haunting resemblance to his dead wife vanish in the return of the boy's animosity.

Laertes stalked towards his son, and from long experience, Menelaos instantly spotted the tell-tale signs: the too-bright eyes, the flushed cheeks, the mean-drunk swagger across the paving stones of the courtyard.

"Ah yes— don't stop on my account, young man. It's not as though you haven't had an audience before," he sneered, as he came to a stop in front of Menelaos.

Laertes' tunic was stained with old food and sweat, and his eyes were bloodshot above stubbled cheeks. He stared down at his son contemptuously. "I heard from one of my customers that my son has become a common street performer in the marketplace."

Menelaos said nothing, just looked at his father with cold blue eyes.

Laertes continued: "So, it's true, eh? Perhaps it's time you put aside your toys, and set to learning an honest trade, rather than running wild in the streets, my fine, talented son."

"I want to become a musician, Father," Menelaos said quietly. "Amyntias said—"

"And Amyntias, that old fop, means more to you than your father, I suppose?" Father interrupted in a voice laden with sarcasm. "A musician! Listen to you, boy. You're a bigger fool than I've suspected. You want to be a musician— when we both know that you never had a tenth of your brother's talent!"

Menelaos refused to be cowed this time. "Amyntias says I have talent."

The wine flush in Laertes' face darkened dangerously. Moving with unexpected swiftness, he snatched the lyre from his son's hands, and smashed it against the nearest column. It splintered with a painful dissonance of snapped strings.

"That'll teach you to talk back to your father, you useless whelp," he growled, as Menelaos stared at him, horrified. "And if I ever catch you playing again, either under my roof or in the Agora, I'll break your fingers!"

Menelaos badly wanted to smash his fist in his father's face. He had grown rapidly in the past few months, and now stood an inch or two taller than his father, but his limbs were thin and gangly compared to Laertes, who was still thickly muscled from years of woodworking. Rage yielding reluctantly to common sense, he settled for a defiant stare, which Laertes pretended not to notice.

"So, as I was saying, I've decided that it is time for you to learn an honest trade. Knowing of your fondness for them, I've spoken with Telesforus, the lyre-maker, and he's agreed to take you on as an apprentice."

Menelaos remained silent.

"Well, aren't you going to thank me, boy?" demanded his father, after an awkward pause. "Well, you'll thank me some day, when you're earning your bread with the honest work of your hands, rather than starving on the street somewhere."

With that, Laertes turned ponderously on his heel, and swaggered away, towards the dining room.

Menelaos leaned down and picked up the shattered remains of his lyre, cradling it in his hands as if it were a wounded animal.

Despite his secret relief at being offered the chance to leave the poisoned atmosphere of his father's house, his apprenticeship was a bitter pill for Menelaos to swallow. He knew that he wouldn't have the time to practice once he began working for Telesforus. And he also knew that his work as an artisan might injure or even cripple his hands. Even if he should escape injury, he would still be too old once he could afford to pay for lessons.

The single remaining string on the lyre snapped with a plaintive twang, and bitter tears rose to blur his vision.

"Someday," Menelaos whispered, softly. "Someday I'll make you pay..."

Six years later

The light, unmistakable laugh caught his attention, and Menelaos, the senior apprentice to Telesforus the lyre-maker, immediately forgot that he was supposed to fetch the new load of seasoned pine from Lukas the Woodcutter.

That laugh could only belong to Chloe. Beautiful Chloe, who haunted his dreams at night, in ways that made him blush in the light of day, yet he could scarcely gather up the courage to stammer a greeting on those infrequent occasions when their paths crossed.

He strained to see her graceful, auburn-haired form in the mass of people that crowded the street ahead of him, and managed to spy the object of his unrequited desire walking with a girlfriend whose face he recalled from other occasions, but whose name he did not know.

Feeling too shy and unworthy to accost his goddess directly, Menelaos followed the two girls through the crowded streets of Pergamon, observing them unseen as they stopped to buy fruit, and ribbons, and pretty faience beads from Egypt. His errand completely forgotten, Menelaos was blissfully content to bask in Chloe's distant radiance, and to let his eyes drink their fill of the way her hips swayed gently when she walked, the highlights gleaming in her reddish brown hair, and the musical sound of her giggles. He strove to fix each detail perfectly in his memory, so he could summon her image as he lay alone on his hard pallet at night.

After an hour or so, Menelaos followed them down a less crowded street, finally seeing them vanish through a gate in a house in the Street of the Cloth Merchants. What to do now? Seized by a sudden impulse, Menelaos climbed the wall shielding the house from the street, finding finger-and-toe holds in the rough masonry.

Fortune favored him; the two girls were sitting beneath a large trellis overgrown with flowering vines that shaded the courtyard. Moving cautiously from the top of the wall, Menelaos eased onto the top of the trellis. Using his elbows and stomach, he managed to wriggle soundlessly forward. It was an ideal spot; the top of the wall hiding him from passerby, and he could look down upon Chloe and her friend through the interstices in the vines.

His position also afforded him the unexpected opportunity to eavesdrop on their conversation. To his immense dismay and embarrassment, he heard that the girls were talking about him:

"Are you sure there isn't anyone, Chloe? What about that about the tall, blonde fellow— Telesforus' apprentice? He's always hanging around the bakery, and staring at you. We've all noticed, and we're dying to know what's going on. Do you know who he is? Has he tried talking to you?" Chloe's friend asked her breathlessly.

Chloe shifted on the hard stone bench, visibly uncomfortable. "I think I know who you mean," she admitted, slowly.

The girlfriend giggled and said: "So you *do* have a suitor... how exciting! Is he from a good family? Have you talked to him? Is he nice?"

"He's not my suitor," Chloe denied, vehemently. "And I don't want him to be. I haven't talked to him. He frightens me."

Chloe's friend sounded genuinely surprised. "Whyever would you think that? He isn't too bad-looking."

Chloe drew in a shuddering breath, and Menelaos felt his stomach contract in dread. His beloved goddess knew who he was, and didn't want anything to do with him. He didn't want to hear any more, but crawling off the trellis and back over the wall without attracting any notice was a difficult feat. And so, despite himself, he listened to Chloe's voice, floating up through the vines in the still, warm, afternoon air, and each of her words hurt him more than any of Father's blows or kicks.

"You don't know anything about him, do you?" he heard Chloe tell her friend, with unveiled scorn. "My brothers say that all the younger apprentices in Telesforus' shop live in absolute terror of him. They say he has a nasty temper, and hits them whenever they do anything to displease him."

"Are you sure?" asked Chloe's friend.

"Oh yes," replied Chloe. "My brothers saw him beat a stray dog to death in the alley behind the shop last month, and for no reason except that Telesforus got angry at Menelaos— that's his name, you know— for sneaking some food out of the kitchen."

"That's terrible!" exclaimed her friend.

Menelaos, his ears and face burning in shame, eased backwards gradually, and was almost at the wall. Just a few seconds more, and he would be able to escape this torment.

"I'm scared, Thais," Chloe said in a low voice that was nevertheless crystal-clear to her unknown eavesdropper. "What if he tries to approach me—or worse? I've already found little presents left around the bakery for me, and I'm afraid they're from him. What am I going to do if he asks Father for permission to court me? He's almost finished with his apprenticeship..."

The trellis buckled and broke in a shower of rotten wood, and Menelaos came hurtling down. He lay sprawled on the paving tiles of the courtyard, the breath knocked out of him, as Chloe's eyes grew wide in terror and she screamed piercingly. Unable to bear the absolute, crushing rejection from the girl he adored, and heedless of the commotion, much less his bruised elbows and knees, he scrambled to his feet, ran through the gate, knocking over the doorkeeper in the process, and took off blindly down the street. Behind him, faintly, he could hear feminine shrieks rising over the wall.

He fled through the narrow alleys of the city as if the Furies were pursuing him. His burning lungs and trembling knees finally forced him to slow down to a sullen walk, but he ignored them in the absolute, overwhelming pain of his broken heart. Long years of enduring Father's torments gave him the iron self-control needed to refrain from weeping in public, but he felt hollow inside, and even the familiar corners of Pergamon seemed alien to him.

As night fell, Menelaos was still wandering around the now-deserted streets of the city, immersed in total misery. As he walked along an unlighted street in an unfamiliar quarter, he was startled when a figure came hurtling out of the shadows towards him. Before he could react, he was slammed up against the nearest wall.

"What—?" The breath was knocked out of him with a gasp as the figure, shorter than he by head and shoulders, shoved him roughly against the wall.

"Quietly, now," said his assailant, eyes glittering in the faint light. "Not so much noise, and you won't get hurt."

Menelaos felt the sharp edge of cold metal pressed against the side of his neck, and the man's hand fumbling around his waist, seeking the pouch of coins given by Telesforus to pay for the wood. And Menelaos found himself filled with icy rage, which banished fear.

The footpad was temporarily distracted by his efforts to cut through the thong that tied the pouch to Menelaos' belt. Menelaos, his arms and shoulders strengthened by endless hours of cutting and shaping wood for the lyremaker, seized the opportunity to lunge forward, throwing the footpad off-balance. As the man sprawled, surprised, in the middle of the unpaved street, Menelaos stepped forward and slammed his sandalled heel down on the thief's arm. The bones snapped audibly, and the man cried out.

Menelaos bent swiftly, and retrieved the knife. The footpad tried to rise, cradling his broken arm. Still caught in the ferocious calm of his ice-cold rage, Menelaos aimd his foot at a precise location on the footpad's torso, and swung with surgical precision. He could predict exactly the results of his kick from personal experience.

A thud, a moan, and the footpad was once again sprawled in the street, no longer aware of anything but the agony radiating outward from his kidneys. Father was nothing if not a good teacher when it came to inflicting pain.

Father... Chloe... The way the other apprentices treat him with a mixture of fear and contempt. And now this footpad, who thought that Menelaos is just another helpless fool.

As Menelaos bent down, the footpad, aware of imminent danger through the red haze of pain, tried to crawl away. Menelaos, beyond rational thought now, grabbed a handful of the man's hair and pulled back his head at a painful angle. There was no chance to scream before the knife in Menelaos' hand cut the footpad's throat.

The blood pooled, glittering blackly in the weak moonlight. Menelaos stepped back, and noticed that the man's dead eyes were still staring at him accusingly. Suddenly, the rage that sustained him was gone, replaced by nausea.

Menelaos staggered to the entrance of the nearest alley, and heaved up the meagre contents of his stomach. When he finished retching, he raised his hand to wipe his mouth, and noticed that it was shaking, badly. He looked back at the body, lying sprawled in the middle of the deserted street, and muttered: "You picked the wrong apprentice to rob, didn't you, swine?"

His strength suddenly deserted him as the implications sank in, and Menelaos staggered back to slump against the nearest wall, while a hundred thoughts ran riot through his mind. Foremost was the question: *What now?*

He had killed a man, even if it was in self-defense— but how could he expect the authorities to believe him? Menelaos thought of home, Father deep in a drunken stupor in the pigsty of a house; he thought of Telesforus, who was stern but not unkind; and then he left the supporting bulk of the wall, and started walking in the direction of the city gates.

He knew what he sought— Diana's Bow, a tavern favored by mercenaries. With the continual fighting between the various Greek city-states, new recruits were always in demand. The night had grown cold, but Menelaos scarcely noticed the wind cutting through his thin tunic. He walked steadily through the unlit streets towards his goal, and the few citizens and slaves who were out and about at this hour shied away from the expression on his face.

Finally, he arrived at Diana's Bow. A sudden moment of anxiety— what if they wouldn't accept him? Then, he squared his shoulders, glared through the entrance into the crowded public room, and stalked in.

He spied his goal immediately: a very large man sitting at a table near the door. The man was marked with a knotted scar that wandered through his dark hair in a crooked line, twisting down to bisect his left eyebrow, giving his face a permanently quizzical expression. Before his courage could fail him, Menelaos was standing in front on the scarred man, who glowered at him.

"What do you want, boy?" growled the mercenary, his sword and his scars proclaiming his profession.

"To join your company," replied Menelaos, boldly. "I am Menelaos."

"Just Menelaos? I see," said the mercenary, still glowering. He looked Menelaos up and down with an appraising eye, noting his height, broad shoulders, and thickly muscled arms. And he noted one more thing— the large, dark brown stain splashed on the front of the boy's tunic.

"So, I don't suppose you have a sword? Or know how to use one?"

Menelaos shook his head, unable to tell whether he made a favorable impression on the scarred man or not. The mercenary's mouth twisted derisively, and Menelaos found his hands knotting the hem of his tunic. With a supreme effort, he forced them to hang open and relaxed at his sides. He couldn't afford to appear nervous now.

"Tell me, boy," barked the mercenary, suddenly. "Have you ever killed a man?"

He watched Menelaos closely as the boy replied. Long experience would be the judge of whether the boy lied to him or not.

"Yes," replied Menelaos, his face blank and cold, the blue eyes icy. No bravado, or boasting. Simply a statement of fact.

"I see," said the mercenary, musingly, his eyes returning to the stain on Menelaos' tunic. "So you're blooded, but untrained. And in trouble with authorities, no doubt."

Menelaos said nothing. But he heard the loud echo of his heartbeat in his ears. The mercenary remained silent, considering, for a few seconds longer, an eternity of suspense for Menelaos.

"Very well, then," he addressed Menelaos, finally. "These are the conditions of your employment: You'll need a helmet and sword, and basic supplies. See my supply master if you don't have them. If you can't pay for them now, we will deduct them from your wages later. I will also train you in use of sword, shield, and spear. As part of this company, you'll get a one-twentieth share of the booty from whatever battles we fight in. I expect you to stay with me for at least two years, to make it worth my while to train you.

"I want to see you at my inn first thing tomorrow morning. You know where we're staying?"

Scarcely able to believe his good fortune, Menelaos nodded.

"Ask for Ares," the mercenary looked at him consideringly."I hope you don't have any illusions about being a soldier for hire— it's a hard life, and probably a short one. We're the expendable part of any army, and most of the time the bastards that hire us try to cheat us out of our share of the booty if they haven't managed to get us killed first. You have the rest of tonight to think about it, boy. If I don't see you tomorrow, well, I'll know what your decision was, won't I?"

"I'll be loyal," Menelaos promised, and then added bitterly; "I don't have anywhere else to go."

"A realist, I see," Ares the mercenary observed, sourly. "Well, that's for the best, isn't it? We may make a decent soldier out of you yet."

Eighteen years later
Near Ilium, with the army of Alexander the Great

"The gods strike you dead, Arsinoe! You've withered my manhood with your foreign witchcraft!

Menelaos was conducting his usual evening inspection of the mercenary camp, when he heard a familiar sound... a fist striking flesh. Then, a muffled exclamation, followed by a curse. Not an uncommon sound in a mercenary camp filled with brutal men and hard-bitten camp followers. But what he heard intrigued him— *witchcraft*?

He strolled over to where a knot of his men were gathered around, watching a domestic dispute out of sheer boredom. At his approach, they moved respectfully aside. Mildly curious, he removed his helmet, cradled it in the crook of his elbow, and looked around the small campsite.

A dark-haired woman was lying sprawled on the ground in front of a tent, holding her cheek. Her eyes, however, were tearless, and bright green with hatred. Despite being known and feared as a brutal man himself, Menelaos felt a sudden kinship for the woman.

A vivid, unwelcome memory of himself as a child flashed across his mind, and he tried to suppress it by recalling who she was. He remembered seeing her once or twice before... ah yes— she was a rarity in camp. A slave girl, owned by one Paulus of Antioch, the newest mercenary to join Menelaos' company. Paulus's slave was noteworthy because few mercenaries were wealthy enough to own slaves, preferring to entrust their savings in portable coin rather than fragile human flesh.

Moved by an unknown impulse, Menelaos stepped forward. "Here, now," he said, roughly. "What's going on?"

Paulus, a stocky black-haired man, scowled at the mercenary captain. "None of your damned business," he spat.

Menelaos raised his eyebrows questioningly, a gesture that his men had learned to recognize early on.

"It isn't?" he inquired with smooth menace.

Paulus seemed oblivious to the danger signs. He drew back a sandaled foot, and kicked the girl viciously in her ribs. She gasped, but did not cry out.

"I ought to have her skinned and use her for a rug," he declared. "It'd probably be an improvement on her skills in bed, the lazy bitch."

A snicker ran through the assembled group of men, and emboldened, Paulus prepared to kick the girl again. Menelaos recognized the challenge to his authority and his lips curled. Before Paulus could strike her again, Menelaos had spun him around to face him.

"I thought I asked you a question, soldier," Menelaos said, without raising his voice. Several of the other mercenaries exchanged meaningful glances. "You know Alexander's rules as well as I do— why are you breaking the peace?"

Paulus glowered at Menelaos defiantly, but his demeanor changed as he saw the expression in the mercenary captain's eyes, and the expectant faces of the other men. Paulus backed down.

"I'm sorry, sir," he mumbled, reluctantly. "She was being disobedient, and I— well, I lost my temper."

"You lost your temper," repeated Menelaos, patronizingly. "A bad thing for a soldier to do. An angry soldier is a dead soldier, Paulus, hmmm?"

Menelaos appeared to consider the situation gravely, and then, to the astonishment of everyone gathered there, he said: "I think the only solution to your discipline problem, Paulus, is to remove the source of that problem. I'll wager my warhorse against Arsinoe here."

As Paulus gaped, Menelaos produced a set of carved ivory dice. He leaned forward and said, too low for the assembled spectators to overhear: "This is an order, not a request, Paulus."

Grumbling, Paulus disappeared into the tent, and fetched a clean hide, which he then spread on the ground. Menelaos caught Arsinoe's wide-eyed stare, and winked at her solemnly while Paulus' back was turned.

The two men tossed once, twice, thrice, while the rest of the mercenary company looked eagerly over their shoulders. None of them particularly liked the newcomer, and they were eager to see him get his comeuppance from their feared leader. Then, Menelaos sat back on his heels, and contemplated the dice, lying neatly side by side on the oxhide.

"It appears that I've won myself a slave girl, Paulus," he remarked, calmly.

Paulus' face turned a dangerous shade of plum. "You've cheated me," he accused. "Those dice are loaded!"

The words had barely escaped his mouth when he found himself sprawled on his back. Menelaos had a foot planted on his chest, and held the cold point of a naked sword to his throat.

"Perhaps I should just notch your ear, like the swine you are," Menelaos said softly, the cold expresssion on his face never changing. The sword flickered lightly, and then shone scarlet at its tip.

As Paulus yelled in outrage, the sword came back to his throat.

"Now," said Menelaos, conversationally. "Care to repeat that accusation?"

Paulus stared up Menelaos, eyes bulging, and shook his head mutely.

"Good," Menelaos removed the sword and stepped back. "This is a well-disciplined company, and I don't tolerate insubordination. Do you understand?"

Paulus nodded, still not speaking, one hand clutched to his ear. Reddish-brown trickles escaped from between his fingers.

"Good."

Menelaos didn't bother to look at Paulus again as he helped the slave girl up, walked away with her, one large hand gently guiding her elbow.

Once back at his tent, she stood awkwardly at the entrance.

"*Were* you using loaded dice?" she asked boldly. For a moment they stood, looking at each other, recognizing some sort of kinship, and Menelaos did something his men would be startled to see: he smiled.

"Of course," he replied. "My horse is too valuable to be left to the whim of Fortune."

The girl grinned in response, showing clean white teeth, then recollected herself. With a weary sigh, she resigned herself to her change in ownership, moved over to stand next to his pallet, and began to remove her tunic. She had been a slave long enough to know what happened next.

But Menelaos surprised her.

"Stop that," he growled, harshly, and the girl, surprised, obeyed him.

"You don't like me?" she questioned, apprehensively.

Menelaos glanced at her, surprised. The girl was pretty enough, or would be if she ever bathed. As fastidious as most Greeks, Menelaos noticed her bare, dirty feet, and the black crescents under her nails, and shuddered inwardly. Her Greek was fluent enough, but accented, and from her fair skin, black hair, and blue-green eyes, he surmised that she was probably Phoenician. He had taken her from Paulus to prove a point, not because he was in the market for a concubine.

"You're fine," he replied, shortly. "But I'm not in the habit of keeping slaves, nor can I afford an extra mouth to feed, so you're free to go."

To his surprise, the prospect of freedom didn't seem to please her. She swallowed nervously, thinking about the fate of an unprotected slave girl in the middle of the Greek Army.

"Can I stay with you? Please?" she whispered, hopefully.

"You know who I am?" he asked her, surprised again. Even the camp whores were aware of his reputation, and he was accustomed to seeing the relief in their eyes when they ended each encounter with him relatively unscathed.

"Oh yes," she replied, eagerly. "Everyone knows who you are, even Alexander himself."

Menelaos was puzzled. She knew who he was, and she still wished to stay with him? Then he thought he knew why:

"You needn't worry about Paulus," he said, wondering that he was stooping to reassure a slave girl. "If you want to go, I'll make sure he doesn't bother you again. There must be plenty of men in this camp who'd be willing to take you in...."

So. For one of the few times in her life, she was being given a choice in her fate. Arsinoe was dumbstruck. His reputation was that of a cold, competant leader of men, a fierce warrior on the field of battle. Yet, he had intervened in the beating of a mere slave, and a woman slave at that, and risked a prize possession to win her. And now, she was free to go if she pleased, to seek another protector.

Revelling in her freedom to choose, Arsinoe looked at her rescuer consideringly.

He was tall and fair, like many of the Greeks in Alexander's army, with cold, ice-blue eyes. Not a bad-looking man, but an unhappy one, she decided.

As he waited for her decision, she noticed that Menelaos had schooled his face to the utter blankness of a stone frieze. Even his mobile mouth was neither smiling nor sneering. Briefly, Arsinoe wondered if he was a freed slave. That careful immobility of expression was the first lesson she learned after being sold into slavery as the daughter of a bankrupt merchant.

Taking a deep breath, she said, "I would like to stay with you, Menelaos of Pergamon. I wouldn't be any trouble to you— and I can cook and clean and keep accounts. I swear you won't regret it."

She finished speaking in a rush, and looked at him with large, pleading eyes.

"But why me?" Menelaos asked, astonished. Looking at the bruises on her arms and legs, both faded and new, he would have wagered that she would leave him as quickly as possible, and find herself a nice, placid farmer somewhere.

"You have been kind to me, and you could not possibly be worse than Paulus. Besides," Arsinoe shrugged with a nonchalance she did not feel. "I have nowhere else to go."

Two years later, near Tyre

"Arsinoë?" Menelaos ducked his head inside the tent flap.

Disappointingly, the tent was empty. Menelaos quirked one of his rare smiles as he spotted the lyre hanging from a hook on the tentpost. After years without touching an instrument, he had begun playing again because Arsinoe had begged him to teach her. He remembered the first time he had picked up the bowed instrument after years as a soldier; his fingers scarred and clumsy with a swordsman's calluses now, the music halting and laced with many sour notes, and worst off all, feeling the sweet, wild stream of talent that had flowed through him as a youth dried up now to a trickle, like a river in summer.

Amyntias had been right after all; he would never be the musician he had once dreamed of becoming. But after a little practice, his tunes could make Arsinoe smile with delight. And that was enough for now.

Menelaos unbuckled his sword and laid aside his helmet, and filled a bowl from a pitcher. He dipped both hands in the cool water and washed the dust from his face and neck.

Then he sat down and wondered where Arsinoe was. It was unusual for her to be absent, and he was hungry after a long day of constructing siege engines for Alexander's army. The campaign to conquer the island city of Tyre was proceeding poorly for the Greek army, and Alexander was chafing at the delay. At thirty-eight, Menelaos was old for a soldier, and he recognized Alexander's mood for what it was—youthful impatience combined with offended pride that a city of merchants should defy the King of Macedon, favored child of the gods.

Somewhat astonished that he survived so long in his dangerous profession, Menelaos had lately been mulling over the idea of retiring. Once this campaign was finished, he would have enough booty collected to perhaps buy himself a small house and a plot of land, and spend his remaining years playing the lyre and growing grapes and olives. With Arsinoe to tend his house and share his bed, of course.

Of course... he was still surprised sometimes how naturally that thought came to him. The slave girl he had saved from a beating by winning a wager on dice had come to occupy a permanent place in his life. Perhaps someday there might even be children to help prune the vines and harvest the olives...

No! Menelaos savagely dismissed the thought. He had no desire to inflict the horror of his childhood upon any other living soul. Arsinoe had timidly brought up the subject a few weeks ago, and he had with terrifying finality quelled any such foolish notions on her part.

Menelaos rose from his stool and paced impatiently around the confines of the tent. His stomach was growling. Where in Hades was she?

The sound of womens' voices approached the tent. Menelaos, relieved, sprang to the tent flap. His relief metamorphosed right back into worry when he saw that it was indeed Arsinoe, but stumbling between the supporting arms of two camp followers. As they passed Menelaos, he saw that Arsinoe's face was ashen.

She did not raise her head to look at him as she plodded in, and assisted by the two other women, collapsed on her pallet with a stifled groan, turning to her side, and drawing her knees up to her chest.

The blonde-haired woman covered her with a blanket and placed a wine jug next to the pallet. She stooped and whispered to Arsinoe: "Elora gave me wine mixed with syrup of poppies. You drink it if the pain gets too bad."

Menelaos, his ears sharpened by worry, overheard every word, although he had schooled his face to its usual impassive expression.

Unwilling to reveal the depth of his concern for a mere slave woman in front of the most notorious gossips in the army, he had not moved from his position at the tent entrance. But as the two women prepared to leave the tent, he caught the redhead by the shoulder.

"What's wrong with her?" he hissed, his fingers digging into her flesh.

"A woman's complaint," she replied, uninformatively, shooting him a cautiously flirtatious glance from eyes heavily lined with kohl and ground malachite. "'Fraid she won't be much use to you tonight, honored sir. You get lonely, you come and see me, eh?"

Menelaos allowed his lips to curl in a sneer as he looked the camp follower up and down, from the roots of her hennaed red hair to the gaudily gilded leather sandals. He did not deign to reply, but released his grip and gave her a small shove out the tent. She went, grumbling resentfully and rubbing her shoulder.

"What a brute! That poor girl," he heard her say maliciously to her companion as they sashayed away. "No wonder she was desperate to see Elora..."

Elora was the camp midwife and herbwoman. What could Arsinoe possibly want with her? Very worried now, Menelaos ducked back inside the tent. Safe from prying eyes, he crouched over the pallet where Arsinoe lay motionless, her fine alabaster skin gray now and sheened with sweat.

Tenatively, he reached out, and smoothed the glossy black hair with awkward tenderness. "Arsinoe?"

Her eyes opened in slow degrees and focused on his concerned face. In her agony and weariness, she noticed the most incongruous thing—his pale hair, close-cropped like most of the soldiers, and thinning slightly now. "I cut your hair crooked again," she whispered, painfully. "I'm sorry..."

"Shhhh," he said, softly, still stroking her hair. Her eyelids fell shut, but he continued his gentle touch, smoothing the perspiration from her brow, tracing the sweetly familiar line of her cheek and lips. He thought that she had fallen asleep when she gave an involuntary groan, and drew her knees even farther into her chest.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked sharply, something about the cast of her face and the clammy feel of her skin reminded him unpleasantly of some of the deaths he had seen on the battlefield, men who had been stabbed in their vitals, men who took agonizing hours to die.

Internal injuries... Elora... suddenly, with a sickening swoop, he knew what was wrong.

Despite her feeble protest, he drew back the blanket, and felt his stomach knot in dismay and horror. The lower half of her tunic was soaked with blood, despite the thick wad of bandages between her thighs, and more blood was seeping through to stain the pallet as he watched, horrified.

Menelaos thought he had lost his faith in the gods long ago, but now he found himself praying:

"Sweet Artemis, protectoress of women, aid Your daughter Arsinoe now. I swear to sacrifice an entire ox to You alone, and to endow Your temple at Ephesus with the golden goblet I won at Issus."

The afternoon faded slowly into night, and Menelaos kept his vigil at Arsinoe's side, feeling powerless to aid her. He left her side only briefly, to light an oil lamp, to chew listlessly on a loaf of stale bread, and to fetch more water. Despite her protests, he forced her to drink a goodly potion of the opium-laced wine, which seemed to ease the pain, and ushered her into a world of dreams. She was restless, mumbling and babbling in Phoenician, of which he understood only the words for "No!" and "Mother."

Sometime after midnight, Arsinoe sat bolt upright in the bed, her eyes blank and staring, and screamed. Menelaos had curled up on the pallet beside her, and was dozing with his arms wrapped around her, trying to keep the chill of approaching death at bay. At her abrupt movement, he rolled off the pallet, snatching for his sword with the ingrained reflexes of a soldier. She raised her arms and pleaded, this time in Greek: "Menelaos! *Please...*!"

"I'm here," he reassured her, but her eyes, despite being open, were blind to all but the dreams brought to her by the poppy.

She was still speaking, but her voice had become low, still pleading. "Elora, help me, please. I'm with child... and he has forbidden it. I don't want him to cast me off. What would I do? Where would I go? Please... oh Isis, sweet Mother Isis, oh no, *no*, it hurts, it *hurts*, it never hurt like this before. *Eloraaaaa!*"

With a last, weak wail, Arsinoe collapsed back into Menelaos' arms. He lowered her back down to the pallet, cradling her gently, his harsh words on the subject of children returning vengefully to haunt him.

In the weak, wavering light of the single oil lamp, Menelaos could see that her pulse beat weakly and erratically in the hollow of her throat, like a moth fluttering around a flame. Her breath was reduced to ragged gasps now, and Menelaos, who had seen death in most of its forms, knew the signs. He stared at her face, both of her hands clutched tightly in his. Her features were blurring and wavering through the film of his unshed tears, and for a brief moment, a trick of the light made it appear as if a golden-haired woman lay there.

"Don't leave me..." whispered Menelaos, echoing the five-year-old boy in his head. *Please don't leave me, Mama. I love you. Please don't leave me alone, Mama.* "Please, Arsinoe... don't leave me. Please."

He raised her hands to his lips, one after the other, but could not force the words *I love you* past the barrier of grief that thickened his throat. Then she sighed, a long exhalation, and trembled, and then did not inhale. And lay utterly still, the lines of pain smoothed from her face.

"*Nooo...*" Menelaos buried his face in her breast, as he felt the invisible currents of her spirit gather themselves up and depart. He lifted her hand gently, where a silver and pearl ring gleamed. It had been a prize of war, and he remembered Arsinoe's incredulous look as he bestowed it upon her unexpectedly. She had worn it constantly. Now he slid the ring from her cold finger, and slipped it over his little finger, the only one where it fit.

After a long time had passed, he collected himself and rose to his feet, tenderly drawing up the coverlet around Arsinoe one last time. Then he left the tent, and as dawn began to turn the eastern horizon pale gray, he strode into the tent of the midwife Elora.

"Get up!" he ordered harshly, ripping the blankets from her slumbering body. Elora sat up with a shriek, her long auburn hair hanging in wild tangles. "Your services are required."

"What!?" exclaimed Elora. "What happened?"

Menelaos looked at her, his face bleached pale and cold with sleeplessness and grief.

"It appears that your vaunted midwifery has managed to deprive me of my slave," he said with contempt. "You butchered her. Now I need you to lay her out properly and give her last rites."

Elora rose, indignantly, and hastily threw on a tunic and shawl.

"*I* butchered her?" she replied, angrily. "That poor girl was desperate with fear that you'd find out about the baby. She said you had forbidden it. How could you make her do such a heartless thing? Otherwise I wouldn't have—"

Menelaos grabbed her arm, and thrust her out of the tent. Startled, she stumbled and fell. Sprawled in an undignified heap in the dirt, Elora looked at his menacing face, towering above her.

"You'd do anything for a handful of silver, Elora," Menelaos said, struggling to hide his grief. He refused to allow this gossiping camp follower to think him a weak fool, overcome by the loss of a mere woman. "And now you have deprived me of a valuable slave with your ineptitude. Arsinoe was wiser than you— we will be marching again shortly, and a squalling baby would have only slowed us down. It's your fault that her decision had such unfortunate— consequences."

Menelaos reached down, and grabbing her arm again, hauled her upright and dragged her, still protesting volubly, to his tent. By the time they arrived, Elora had worked herself up to a monumental fit of temper. She turned to face him at the tent's entrance, and drew breath to berate him yet again.

Menelaos thought swiftly of the still, cold figure laying on the blood-soaked bed inside, and the lyre hanging forlorn on the tent peg, and without thinking, he drew back his hand and slapped Elora across the face.

"Silence!" he commanded, still icy. "Not another whining word out of you, woman! Just do what must be done, and then get out. Arsinoe deserved better than what you did to her."

"You did no better!" retorted Elora, without thinking. Then, catching sight of the murderous expression on Menelaos' face, she fled inside the tent to wash and lay out the dead woman.

* * *

Menelaos performed the last, and most important ritual. He took a coin from his carefully saved hoard, which was to have bought a comfortable old age for Arsinoe and himself, and placed it gently under her tongue. It was silver, as befitted a wife rather than a slave, to pay dark Charon to ferry her across the River Styx, to the far shore where the dead dwelt.

* * *

Tyre fell within a month, and after extracting his revenge on the inhabitants for the defiance, Alexander gave the order to strike camp, and march. Their next destination: Egypt, the land of the Nile, many weary miles of desert away. Menelaos rode mechanically, and ate when the others ate although the food had no flavor and he no appetite. And then he rode again.

But he was dead inside. A mere woman, a slave girl won in a dice game, and he felt more forsaken than he ever had in his life. And so, reminded of his mortality, and weary of anguish, it was with profound gratitude that he felt an invisible shell of ice descend around his heart, numbing the pain and sealing off all emotion. He was finished with grieving. Forever.

Near Memphis, Egypt, several months later

Menelaos is sitting in the shadows of the Agora colonnade, playing his lyre for the vendors and buyers of fresh produce. Suddenly, he notices a woman walking towards him, and with a joyous smile he recognizes her: it is Arsinoe, her raven's-wing hair lying smooth and glossy on her white shoulders. Menelaos opens his mouth to call her name, but the greeting chokes in his throat as he sees that she is carrying a baby. He tries to rise from his seat and escape her, but can't; he looks down, and sees that both of his legs end at mid-thigh in dirty, rag-wrapped stumps. Then Arsinoe is upon him, thrusting a bloody baby at him, and her white gown is stained with blood dripping and dripping, leaving a trail of small dark spots on the white limestone pavement. Menelaos tries to roll away, dragging his useless legs behind him, but finds himself fetched up against a barrier. A pair of man's legs block his escape. "I thought I told you never to perform in public again!" roars a dreadfully familiar voice, and Menelaos looks up just as Laertes snatches away the lyre and smashes it against a white marble column. Arsinoe laughs, clutching the gruesome child to her breast. "But, Father!" protests Menelaos, just as Laertes draws back his foot and prepares to kick him...

"Ah!" Menelaos awoke, sweating and straining his eyes in the dim light of the tent. Impulsively, he reached down and felt both of his legs. They were still there, uncrippled— at least until his next battle. Another nightmare... Arsinoe was dead, and his father had probably drunk himself into the grave long since. And his lyre had been packed away at the bottom of his saddlebags months ago, shortly after—

Menelaos shook his head, grimacing, and ran his fingers through his short, spiky pale hair. Then he sat up, and swung his legs— his undamaged, whole legs— over the edge of his pallet, and stood up. He knew from past experience that his ghosts were restless tonight, and that he would get no pleasant sleep.

He decided to go for a walk, instead, and check up on his sentries.

There had been a series of strange incidents in the mercenary camp lately, and his men were telling tales of a beautiful, blood-drinking woman who approached them while they stood guard. A lamia. Menelaos was skeptical. He thought it more likely that the lamia was an excuse for sentries who dallied with the local girls while on duty.

Well, he would make the best of his sleepless state and prove once and for all that the lamia was a fanciful tale concocted by his guards to excuse their negligence. He buckled on his sword, grabbed a small, covered lantern, and left the tent, smiling grimly.

Finding a small copse of bushes, he concealed himself, and watched his guard, a personable young lad named Aeschus, standing watch. The moon was nearly full, and it was bright enough that Menelaos kept the lantern tightly shuttered, not wanting to give away his presence to the sentry.

Nothing happened for quite some time. Young Aeschus duly paced his appointed rounds, peering curiously at every patch of shadow with admirable alertness. He looked as though he expected an enemy to spring, fully armed, from behind each bush and outcropping. Menelaos, beginning to feel sleepy, considered returning to his tent.

As he turned his head to look for the lantern, Menelaos saw a shadow swoop by. It was far too large for a bat or bird. He strained his eyes, intrigued, and saw a woman landing gently behind Aeschus. It was impossible to make out her features in the moonlight, but he noticed she had dark hair, which fell unbound to her waist, and wore costly, pleated Egyptian draperies.

As he watched, dumbfounded, Aeschus noticed her presence, and moved happily into her embrace. She kissed him tenderly, caressing his golden hair, as Aeschus eagerly fumbled with his garments and hers. He buried his head between her breasts as she continued to run her fingers through his thick hair. She raised one of her legs, graceful as a dancer, and wrapped it around his hips. Then, as he embraced her even more tightly, and began to thrust, she gently kissed the length of his throat, and bit him there. Aeschus moaned loudly, but whether in pain or rapture, it was difficult to tell.

Menelaos decided he had seen enough. He drew the bronze cover off his lantern, and rushed forward, his sword drawn. The woman was still holding Aeschus, but he had gone limp in her embrace.

She turned, clearly startled, as she heard Menelaos approach. He caught a glimpse of yellow eyes and fangs, and, as he swung at her with his sword, she flew upward in a cloud of dark silk and was gone.

Shaken, Menelaos looked down at the guardsman, crumpled unconscious at his feet. There were two small puncture wounds on the side of his throat.

* * *

Menelaos was in a foul mood as he returned to his tent at sundown the following evening. He had been arguing with Alexander's advisors all afternoon, and still he'd been cheated of the share of booty promised to his men for their part in the siege of Tyre. Plus, he still had Aeschus to deal with— the young guardsman was conscious and apparently recovering from his encounter with the demon, but he could not remember the details.

Absorbed in his aggrieved train of thought, Menelaos ducked into his tent, and was fumbling with his helmet strap when he saw a woman's glossy dark hair gleaming in the light of a single oil lamp. For a moment, he felt shock and unexpected joy contract in his chest— *Arsinoe!* — and then the woman looked up at him, eyes shining amber in the wavering radiance.

Arsinoe is dead, reminded the malicious little voice in his head.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded of his visitor in a voice hostile with disappointment.

The woman laughed, and the sound was like the pleasant chiming of small bells. She sat, enthroned like a queen on his pallet, and her presence filled the confines of the tent with an exotic but disturbingly familiar scent.

"Why, I came to visit you," she said, brightly. "After our unexpected meeting last night, I thought I should at least introduce myself. I am Sharibet."

The lamia. Menelaos recalled the sight of her, casting aside Aeschus like a limp rag doll, the blood gleaming dark upon her lips. His hand went automatically to the hilt of his sword.

Sharibet shook her head, a quick, commanding gesture.

"That won't be necessary," she said, quietly. "I was merely interested to see what kind of man would be brave enough to come after me, armed with nothing more than a sword." Her lips quirked in an ironic smile. "I must be getting careless in my age, if I allowed you to creep up on me like that."

Menelaos said nothing, but continued to watch her warily. Although he made no further move to draw his sword, his hand still rested lightly upon its hilt.

Sharibet took the opportunity to cast her spell of forgetfulness. She captured the beat of his heart with her mind, and the clear blue of his eyes in a web of amber, murmuring, "You saw nothing last night. It was a dream, an unpleasant dream brought on by your anger at finding Aeschus derelict in his duty. You are tired, now, and your eyes feel heavy with the need to sleep. When you awake, you will not remember my visit..."

Menelaos shook his head, breaking the spell she was trying to establish.

"Get out," he commanded wearily, with a wave of his hand toward the tent flap. The pearl ring gleamed like solidified moonlight on his little finger.. "Or drink my blood. I don't care. Just stop chattering at me, woman."

Sharibet, startled by his unexpected resistance to her vampire coercion, felt a moment of unthinking rage sweep through her. She had never failed to enscorcel a mortal before. How dare he defy her, this aging soldier with his moon-pale hair and heart of ice?

Menelaos saw her eyes turn from clear amber to an unhuman golden green, and knew a moment of sheer terror. She was a demon, indeed, no matter how beguiling her smile or smooth her dark hair and skin, and he had no doubt that she could kill him without a moment's thought or hesitation.

Sharibet quickly regained control of herself, and her eyes faded slowly back to amber. She cocked her head, playing the coquette again, and considered him.

"Ah, but you are a surprise, aren't you? How very intriguing... You must come and dine with me in my house tomorrow night," she ordered. "I wish to speak with you— in more comfortable surroundings."

"What if I refuse?" asked Menelaos, belligerently.

Sharibet smiled, but this time, it was neither seductive or coquettish.

"My food and wines are reputed to be excellent," she said softly. "And I would be most insulted if you refused my invitation. I would be very disappointed."

Something in the way she said this sent a chill running through Menelaos.

"And are you going to drink my blood, too?" he countered.

Sharibet laughed with genuine amusement.

"Perhaps," she replied, and then added, rougishly: "Bring your lyre and play for me. Ask for the House of Sharibet in the city— it is well-known."

Then she was gone, moving so swiftly that Menelaos thought she had transformed herself into a breeze and vanished.

Menelaos' first thought was to refuse, on principle— he took no orders from any woman, demon or not! And he would play his lyre for no one. He had not touched it since—

He lay awake on his hard pallet for a considerable part of the night, listening to his horse moving restlessly on its tether outside his tent, debating the wisdom of accepting or refusing the invitation of a blood-drinking demon. A *beautiful*, blood-drinking demon. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had nothing left to lose.

Death in the embrace of a demon was infinitely preferable to living as a crippled beggar in the streets, the fate of many a soldier, old and young. His mind made up, he wrapped the blanket more securely around him, and fell soundly asleep.

No nightmares troubled him that night. Instead, he dreamed he was on a raft, drifting down a broad river, while Arsinoe stretched out her arms to him in welcome from the opposite shore.

* * *

The first thing that Menelaos noticed about the House of Sharibet was the garden. There were masses of flowers planted everywhere— in the courtyard, against the walls, and in large tubs along the walkways and next to the entrances. Making cautious inquiries about her in the city, he had learned that she had a reputation for distilling delicate fragrances from the flowers she cultivated so assiduously. Her scents were much in demand among the nobles of Memphis, scenting their skins, their clothing, their wigs.

She greeted him at the entrance to the house, looking seductive and mysterious in a golden silk gown, and he was struck anew by the exotic, yet familiar scent of her perfume. It stirred a memory that slid just out of the focus of his mind's eye, like a fish in a carp pond smoothly eluding a questing hand.

Then she looked down, noticed the lyre case tucked beneath his arm, and her smile widened slightly. Menelaos bristled, suddenly regretting that he'd let a woman— demon or not— dictate to him. The lyre was a beautifully crafted instrument of wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory, a souvenir of Alexander's victory over the Persian army at Issus. He had held it for a long moment after unpacking it in his tent earlier that evening, haunted by the memory of standing next to Arsinoe, correcting the position of her slender fingers on the strings.

"Welcome to my house, Menelaos of Pergamon," she said, taking his hand, and leading him into a beautifully furnished banqueting room.

As he looked around curiously, at the walls and columns painted with a garden of flowers that rivalled the real garden outside, and the richly carved and inlaid furniture, Sharibet reappeared at his side, smelling sweetly spicy with that haunting perfume. If only he could remember where he had smelled it before... She offered him a goblet.

"My finest wine," she said. "Imported from Crete. Drink, and be merry."

Menelaos scowled and shook his head. He could not abide the taste of wine— it held too many unpleasant memories.

"Drink," she urged. "Don't insult my hospitality."

Menelaos resentfully reached out his hand to accept the goblet. He almost gagged on the first sip, then forced himself to down a long swallow, after which his throat and lips seemed to go numb.

Sharibet's silent servants began to serve him supper, and while it was truly excellent— roasted duck, fresh-baked bread, honeyed pastries and ripe, sweet fruit— he scarcely noticed the flavors as he concentrated on finishing off the jug of Crétan wine. Sharibet, who had hoped that the alcohol would make him silly and pliant, noticed with concern that he had become very quiet by the final course, and poured him the last of the wine.

"So," she said lightly, hoping to distract him from his sullen mood. "I hear that you were a musician of some renown. Play for me now."

Menelaos bristled at her imperious tone, and his first impulse was to rudely refuse, but then he reluctantly opened the case sitting at his feet. He had brought the damned thing with him, hadn't he?

As he tuned the strings, feeling his fingers grown heavy and clumsy with the wine, Sharibet moved to stand behind him, seductively draping her long, rippling black hair over his arms and shoulders. Just as Arsinoe used to do...

Fired with a sudden drunken rage, he flung out his arm to push her away. "Don't do that," he shouted at her, his face twisted. "Don't you *ever* do that again!"

The lyre slipped from his numb and nerveless hand. It flew to the tiled floor, and both of them heard the delicate instrument break with a discordant twang of strings. They glared at each other, speechless.

"Blasphemer," gasped Sharibet, her reverence for the lyre as a sacred object having survived the millenia separating her from a distant Sumerian childhood. She slapped at his back, her preternatural strength sending him toppling over onto the now-twisted lyre. As he fell, he flung out his hand, and grabbed at her, catching a handful of golden silk. The fabric tore with a shrill scream.

As he lay there, stunned, she lashed out with a sandaled foot, and through his drunken haze, Menelaos felt the lyre break against his ribs, shattering wood and bone alike.

The sound of the snapping strings filled Menelaos with more pain than he thought possible, and Sharibet's house suddenly became crowded with his ghosts.

He glared up, focusing his eyes through a haze of wine and the choking embrace of his broken ribs, and saw her standing over him. The scent of sour wine brought a memory of a tunic stained with old food and wood varnish, and a long-ago afternoon in the courtyard of his father's house.

To her astonishment, he reentered the fray, and she, despite her superior vampire strength, was overwhelmed as he lunged unexpectedly, and threw himself on top of her.

"You dare!" Sharibet gasped at his impudence, pinned despite her preternatural strength under his greater mass.

Menelaos smiled as he felt bare, cool skin beneath his thighs. He moved against her, slowly, deliberately.

Sharibet licked her lips. He would die for this—but not yet. No mortal man would *ever* overpower her again. She would see him completely broken and humbled before this evening ended. To add insult to injury, he had both hands around her throat, squeezing.

He was still smiling.

Sharibet's amber eyes darkened with sudden, unpleasant memories of her own. Aku-Potter her first husband, smiling as he forced himself on the terrified twelve-year-old he had purchased for a goat and a bronze cauldron. How she'd hated him, and how carefully she'd planned his death with a dish of prepared mushrooms. How long it had taken for him to die. Her iron self-control began to slip, and she felt her fangs descend involuntarily for the first time in several hundred years.

And she invoked her special powers, honed by decades of intense study with Chaldean sorcerers, reaching deep into Menelaos' mind for the worst thing he could ever imagine doing, and ripping it from his consciousness.

Menelaos looked down, and suddenly saw golden hair spilling over the silken cushions. Sharibet had vanished, and his mother lay struggling beneath him.

"Menelaos... my son," she whispered, pleading with him.

He heard again his father's voice in his head, silent these many years, accusing him of killing his mother. And instead of releasing her, he found himself more enraged than ever. She had left him, she abandoned him to a living hell with his father. He looked down at her features, twisted in fear, her face suffused with blood from his strangling grip, and was suddenly overwhelmed with perverse desire, and the overriding need to purge her ghost from his mind.

His hands tightened around her neck in a murderous frenzy as he forced himself inside her. Revenge was his at last— for all the hurts and humiliations he had suffered at the hands of his father— for her desertion of him— and the anger was wilder and stronger than anything he had ever felt before.

He was raping his mother; killing her— and he could not stop himself. He did not want to stop himself.

Love— desire— loathing— and rage— above all, rage, licking away with fierce flames at the structure of his sanity, his humanity.

He saw the features of the woman beneath him blur, becoming a golden-eyed demon, who snarled and clawed at him, then shimmered back to Hermione, her blue eyes reflecting his own madness.

Sharibet's sharp teeth, gleaming between Hermione's lips, pierced his throat and drained him in desperate reaction as she lost control.

Menelaos sank into toward oblivion with his mother's face before his eyes, and her perfume, finally remembered from that long-ago day in Pergamon, scenting the air around him.

He was drowning in the black currents of a river, the dark waters closing in over his head, sweeping him towards a distant shore. He was trying to keep his head up, looking for a particular figure on that shore. And there she was, waiting for him, smiling as he approached the shore. At last... he was almost there... almost in Arsinoe's arms again...

Then a rope of rippling hair wound itself around his arms and shoulders, and pulled him back from his goal with relentless strength. He looked away from Arsinoe, and glanced back over his shoulder. And met Sharibet's triumphant, inhuman smile.

Oh, no, you don't escape that easily, he heard a voice like chiming bells say. *You are mine. Forever.*

Three days later

Menelaos opened his eyes to an Egyptian fresco of duck hunting painted on the smooth plaster of the ceiling. He felt the dizziness of momentary disorientation— where had his tent gone? Then he remembered where he was.

He rose from the narrow, hard bed cautiously, feeling curiously invigorated but hollow. There were no windows in the little room— yet he could see the colors of the room's wall paintings glowing in the dimness. He looked up, alerted by a sixth sense, and saw Sharibet standing in the doorway, looking at him, an unfathomable expression in her large amber eyes.

He looked at her unbruised throat, and his hands tightened into fists at his sides as the memory struck him.

"You," he said, shocked and curious at the same time. But not angry. He felt himself somehow transformed beyond anger. "You killed me, didn't you?"

The walls of the small, windowless room seemed to swallow his words, and render them as flat and lifeless as the frescoes that pretended to gambol around the doorways and over the ceiling.

Sharibet said nothing, just looked at him with enormous amber eyes.

"So," he said finally, wondering if she intended to keep him a prisoner here. "What happens now?"

"Menelaos— my son," she said, coolly. "Welcome to your new life."

He looked at her, fascinated that he could hear the occasional beat of her heart, that he could smell the faintly sweet scent of cassia and myrrh even from across the stone chamber. Her scarlet gown glowed with a light of its own in the dim light. And he felt empty, purged of all human emotion.

"So," he replied. "I'm a demon now."

He heard himself give an unpleasant laugh, and suddenly he realized that he would never fear any mortal thing again. Ever. She had burned away all of his mortal weakness, all of his mortal terror. He was free. Sharibet had shattered and remolded his broken mortal self into something with the newborn powers of a dark god.

She was still looking at him, curiously. He noticed a small amphora in her hands; the most enticing smell emitting from it, and he felt suddenly parched, ravenous.

"Your hair..." she said quietly. "It's turned completely white."

* * *

Sharibet, ancient, powerful, shared with him the secrets of flight, of altering the memories of mortals, of protecting himself from sunlight and holy places. And she taught him the Code, that all vampires must obey.

He soaked up her lessons with a thirst akin to the thirst he now felt for blood, an apt pupil in all things but one. He refused to abandon the sweet thrill of the hunt, of choosing his victims and taking them in the warm Memphis nights. It was his addiction, and his defiance— for, as the weeks passed, he chafed at her tutelage. She urged him to take a mortal lover, to learn the self-control needed for the little drink that dazed but did not kill.

Menelaos sneered at this advice behind her back. Stop? He was a god now. What need was there for him to stop short of the ultimate thrill of the hunt, and lose the moment when he could feel the dark taste of death rushing into his mouth, spicing the hot, salty blood?

Finally, one evening, he awoke from his sleep to find Sharibet standing at the door to his chamber, barring his way as he tried to leave.

"Not tonight," she said, quietly. "There have been too many deaths in Memphis already."

Menelaos looked at her, disbelievingly. "I'm hungry," he growled, trying to push past her.

She refused to move, her tiny, fragile-seeming body rooted to the ground. She was holding a goblet, which she extended to him.

"There are other ways of satisfying your hunger," she said. "And it is long past time you learned them. You cannot always hunt, not if you wish to pass as mortal, and live among them in peace."

Menelaos sniffed at the contents of the goblet, his lips curling in distaste.

"Goat...?" he asked, resentfully. "I don't understand why you bother to try to pass as one of them— you could rule them as a goddess."

"Ah, but I did that once, and it was... unbearably tedious after a while." Sharibet smiled faintly, but, recognizing the challenge to her authority, did not withdraw the proffered goblet. "I wish to continue my current career as Memphis' finest parfumier, so I am telling you to stop hunting."

"And drink animal blood. From a jug..." Menelaos said, with loathing. "I think not."

Sharibet made a gesture, and suddenly Menelaos found himself bound with invisible currents of air, unable to move. He no longer feared anything mortal— but Sharibet... his heart beat unexpectedly, remembering what she had done to him while he was still alive.

"Your recklessness is endangering all of us, fledgling," she said, coldly. "You will stop hunting mortals, and you will not resume until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

Menelaos glared at her resentfully, chafing more than ever at his powerlessness in her presence. She stared back at him, still binding him.

"Yes," he growled, from between gritted teeth.

* * *

The moon had set, and the streets of Memphis were dark and quiet. Elora saw the man's silhouette approaching her, and thought with weary relief, *One more customer tonight, then I can go home.*

Since leaving Alexander's army, "home" had been a shabby little room rented from a sour-faced Egyptian shopkeeper. She had once made a comfortable living as a midwife, but after that slave girl's death, the other camp followers had ostracized her, eventually forcing her to leave the camp. And her lack of the Egyptian language had left her no other choice than her present occupation.

At least her departure from the army camp meant she did not have to face the slave girl's master, the moody, terrifying mercenary, Menelaos. She shivered, remembering his ice-blue eyes gazing flatly at her during the long march from Tyre to Egypt, and then she forced her thoughts back to the present.

The man drew closer, and Elora wearily thrust her hip out in a seductive pose. "Are you lonely, good sir?" she called out, in Greek, and then repeated her question in badly accented Egyptian.

The man waved her away impatiently, and kept walking. He had not even looked up at her. Elora felt despair, and anger as she watching his retreating back. He was likely the last possibility for tonight, since it was so late, and she was still several coins short of her rent.

"Hello, Elora," said a man's voice, directly behind her left shoulder. Elora gave an involuntary shriek, and then she recollected herself. The voice had spoken in Greek, and it sounded familiar. Perhaps she needn't worry about her rent, after all. She arranged her mouth in a practiced smile, and turned around to see who it was.

The tall figure with its close-cropped pale hair was unmistakable, even in the shadows.

"Menelaos," Elora said in a choked voice.

Menelaos did not reply, just stood looking at her. The darkness hid his eyes from her, but she imagined that they wore the same cold expression as before.

"It's been—" Elora began backing up, step by cautious step. "It's been a long time."

"So it has. But you still owe me for Arsinoe's death, I believe," he said softly. "And I've come to collect."

Elora turned to flee— and ran straight into his chest, as hard and unyielding as a statue's. How had he gotten behind her so quickly? Before she could scream, one arm imprisoned her upper arms and chest in an unbreakable grip, and his other hand covered her mouth. Cold, he was so cold, and inhumanly strong.

She squirmed and kicked, but to no avail, as Menelaos drew her further into the shadows, into the pitch-black mouth of a narrow alley that reeked powerfully of stale urine. He held her close in his chilly embrace, enjoying her struggles, the intoxicating scent of her terror, and the soft whimpers that escaped his muffling hand. He loved this moment, just before the kill, when he felt as powerful as a god. Sharibet could counsel him from now until eternity to stop killing, to take mortal lovers, to learn the art of the little drink, but nothing could ever compare to this.

"I'm hungry, Elora," he murmured softly, like a lover, his lips brushing the edge of her ear. His cold tongue slowly licked the side of her throat, feeling the warmth of her, tasting the hot, salty liquor of her blood rushing frantically beneath the skin as it fled just ahead of her pounding heart.

Elora made one last frantic attempt to escape his embrace, before his arms tightened, holding her upper body and head immobile. She felt completely helpless as she stood, the entire length of her back pressed against him, her head forced back to rest against his stony shoulder. His lips moved briefly against her exposed throat, as he said something she could not quite hear.

There was a moment of exquisite agony as his fangs sank into the proffered artery, then she felt the ecstatic rush of her life escaping upwards, into his hungry, seeking mouth. And then she felt and saw nothing at all.

Menelaos held her a moment longer, trying to recapture the fleeting, splendid moment of receiving her death, and then he snapped her neck, and tossed her carelessly aside.

"Menelaos, my son," he heard a stern voice say, as he left the alley and reemerged into the street.

He stopped, and saw her standing in the middle of the street, the starlight reflecting in her large eyes and lending her dark hair and smooth skin a faint luminescence.

Sharibet stepped closer, her expression as stern as her voice. Suddenly, her ageless face seemed ancient .

"So this is what your promises are worth," she said.

"It needed to be done," Menelaos replied, defensively, tasting the echo of fresh blood on his lips. For how long had Sharibet been watching?

"You promised, no more killing," she said. "I thought I had made the reasons clear to you."

"I made no promises," Menelaos sneered. "Oh, yes. You gave me the powers of a god, and now you forbid me to use them. Tell me, Sharibet— are you happy, drinking goat's blood from a pottery jug? You? The oldest and most powerful of us all?"

Sharibet stepped forward, and slapped him, hard. He snarled and stared incredulously at her.

"You are getting old," Menelaos said. "And perhaps you're even a little afraid of me. Am I stronger than you, Sharibet?"

A hurricane knocked him off his feet, and he found himself lying in the middle of the street, Sharibet's sandalled foot grinding against his throat.

"You are so young, fledgling," she said, remote as a goddess. "And so selfish. I have made my home here, for now, and I wish to be left in peace to tend to my other hobbies. I think it is time that you left me. If you are determined to make trouble, make it elsewhere."

Sharibet removed her foot and began to walk away. "Good-bye, Menelaos. I hope that someday you learn that there is more to this existence than the momentary pleasure of the hunt."

"Leave you?" Menelaos said. "But where will I go?"

There was no reply. Sharibet had vanished into the warm Egyptian night.

* * *

He left Memphis that night. Uncertain of his destination, he flew through the darkness, following the shimmering path of the Nile north, the only thought in his mind was to put as much distance between Sharibet and himself as was possible. Menelaos flew on until the sky grew dangerously light with the imminent dawn. Then, he found a safe place to sleep in an old tomb, protected from the deadly rays of the sun by the centuries-old weight of limestone and granite.

He awoke unexpectedly, several hours before sunset, shaking from an old nightmare of his father which had stubbornly pursued him even into this new life. Then, lying in the dusty darkness, among the dried piles of funerary offerings and warped furniture, he knew where he would go.

Home— to Pergamon.

He fell asleep again, smiling, and dreamed of blood ripened by years of too much wine.

Pergamon, one month later

The house of Laertes the furniture maker stood empty. The furnishings were gone, the plaster on the walls stained and peeling, and wild grass grew hip-high in the courtyard, outlining the cracks in the limestone blocks that paved it. It was much smaller and much shabbier than he remembered.

Menelaos stalked though the house, snarling in the twilit mustiness. His expanded senses told him that except for the mice and owls, the house had been empty for months.

A sudden thought struck him, and he walked out of the house, following the maps of his memories to the house of Telesforus. The shop was closed, but he could hear mortals in the courtyard of the house that adjoined it. He considered his course of action, then, grudgingly, decided to pass as mortal.

He pounded on the gate, and heard the slow, shuffling step of the doorkeeper approaching. Slowly, the gate opened, just a crack.

Menelaos saw a rheumed eye peering at him. "Who are you? What do you want?" asked the voice.

"I've come to see Telesforus, the lyre maker," replied Menelaos, easily shoving the gate open. "I'm an old apprentice of his, and I was hoping for news."

The old slave who was the doorkeeper had stumbled backwards when Menelaos forced the gate, but he still held his ground.

"Telesforus died three years ago," he said flatly, barring the intruder's way into the courtyard. "Now go away."

Menelaos leaned forward, shocked. "He's dead?"

The slave shrugged. "It happens. An accident with the saw, and the wound turned putrid."

"And what news of Laertes, the maker of furniture?" Menelaos hissed.

"Ah, that old fool. He finally drank himself to death about half a year ago. No one thought he'd last as long as he did."

Menelaos grew very still. "I see," he said, barely controlling the urge to yield to his vampire rage and kill the old man.

Instead, he spun around and left. The gatekeeper, puzzled, and a little frightened by the strange encounter, peeked around the gatepost. There was no sign of the tall stranger with cold blue eyes and the close-cropped white hair. The gatekeeper felt a chill between his shoulderblades, and he hastened to bar the gates.

Menelaos walked back through the streets of Pergamon in a cold rage. Father had escaped him by half a year! And his rightful vengeance was lost, forever...

He passed a tavern, spilling its scents of sour wine and unwashed bodies into the street. A man came weaving out, and stumbled against Menelaos' cold, hard bulk.

Menelaos noticed the stained tunic and burly arms of a woodworker. He snarled, feeling his fangs descend and the molten power gather behind his eyes. "You may not be my father," he growled. "But you'll do, for now."

"I beg your pardon?" the man slurred just before Menelaos quenched his rage and disappointment in the man's wine-laced blood.

"Apology accepted," said Menelaos, tossing the body into the shadows.

Rome, 64 AD
Three hundred and eighty years later

The evening's festivities were well underway when the Emperor's current favorite, a tall, pale-haired Greek, entered the banquet hall. Officially, his position at court was that of instructor in the lyre, but whispered rumors suggested that his lessons extended far beyond the plucking of a few strings.

Nero had changed, become a twisted shadow of his former self, since falling under the spell of the newcomer.

Menelaos, his lips curled in the slight sneer tht Nero admired and strove to emulate, took his place at the Emperor's side. He accepted red Falernian wine from one of the servants, the old pearl ring gleaming moon-pale on his little finger against the goldwork of the goblet, and pretended to sip at it while he scanned the mostly drunken mass of bodies eating and fornicating on the couches below the dais. He froze as he spotted a pair of newcomers entering the hall— one of Nero's other favorites, dragging a young, obviously patrician woman into the hall.

The girl looked clearly shy and very uncomfortable at witnessing the orgy currently in progress. But her features were somehow hauntingly familiar.

Menelaos saw her smile hesitantly in response to something her companion, and then he knew. *Arsinoe...*

"Who is that with young Marcus Lucius Severinus?" Menelaos asked, fascinated despite himself as the young man and the girl approached the dais. Marcus Lucius clearly intended to introduce the girl to the Emperor. Nero was greedily stuffing pastries in his mouth, but something in Menelaos' tone made him pause, and give his music teacher a sudden, sharp, sideways glance.

"Her name is Janella Caecelia Tibulla," replied Nero, carelessly. "Would you like her? She's betrothed to Marcus Lucius, but he won't mind— not if I give him some new toys to make up for the loss of his bride. I was thinking about confiscating her father's estates, anyhow. He has a summer villa in Herculaneum that I've fancied for quite a while now..."

Menelaos smiled as he caught the eye of the dark-haired girl. She froze, and then looked away, trying desperately to avoid eye contact. He felt the old thrill of the hunt shiver through his body.

"Why, thank you," said Menelaos, as the girl's blue gaze returned helplessly to his, and her steps slowed. "I accept your most generous offer. She reminds me of someone I used to know..."

Toronto, 1992

Sunrise finally came, and LaCroix stirred sluggishly. The odor of scorched clothing was overpowering to his vampire senses, and he grimaced. Unable to hunt, he knew from past experience that it would be a long time before he recovered his full strength. He rose slowly, and made his painful, stiff way towards the window.

Let Nicholas think that he has won, for now. Let him grow careless in his foolish dreams of regaining his mortality, while I heal and grow strong again.

And as for Janette, Nero's gift to him...

Drawing aside the curtain, he turned his face towards the illuminated skyline of downtown Toronto, the buildings set like jewels on the distant horizon.

"I'll never let you go... " LaCroix said softly, a vow to the dark gods of the night.

— The End —

[and now, a word from our sponsors...]

Migraine Commercial
by Sharon S. Scott

View of the skyline of Toronto at night. Cut to ALMA, *standing in front of the Raven.*

ALMA: Are you one of the two million people who suffer from migraines? If you are, let me tell you about a new fast, guaranteed cure. NIBBLES. Yes, folks, from the research laboratories of The Raven comes a cure for migraines, tested on humans throughout the centuries, a secret only recently revealed to those not "of the blood..."

Cut to: a lineup: LACROIX, JANETTE, NICK, SPIKE, *all of whom look seductively at the camera (except* SPIKE, *who looks menacing).*

ALMA [*voiceover*]: Let one of these practitioners of the ancient art cure YOUR migraines, PERMANENTLY! And best of all, this process is GUARANTEED to work! For just $19.95, you get a guaranteed cure for your headache, and if you come by within the next hour, we'll also give you ABSOLUTELY FREE, eternal life!*

You'll feel RENEWED! So come on by the Raven and let one of our practitioners NIBBLE on you tonight!

**batteries not included*

Icebreaking
by Valerie Meachum

What are you doing, Nicholas? He shook his head in answer to his own silent question. Allowing himself to be caught up in the enthusiasm of a well-meaning but very naive young woman, that was what. Didn't he know better than that by now?

"Solving a puzzle is its own reward for me," she'd said, and he had no doubt that she'd meant it. Even if the statement proved false later on, he was certain she was not deliberately deceiving him.

But she was quite a puzzle herself, this Natalie Lambert. A doctor, a scientist, buried so deep in her work that she remained there far into the night even on her birthday. He had never expected such a mind to accept the reality of his existence with barely a blink, let alone hold tightly to that knowledge despite his efforts to erase it. Failing that, he had drawn on long-discarded mannerisms to frighten her away— and succeeded only in drawing her closer. That proximity scared him, scared him more even than his inability to predict her reactions. He didn't want to be the one to teach her how deadly such unbridled curiosity could be.

But for now he had agreed to consider her offer, and found to his surprise that it seemed possible. Science had explored so much territory that in his proper time had been considered magic— why shouldn't it be able to find the key to vampirism?

"Dr. Lambert?"

She looked up sharply from her desk, her face that of a startled child for a split-second before the rational woman took over. "Hi. I wondered if you'd ever come back. You seemed pretty determined to get rid of me the other night."

"Not determined enough."

Crossing her arms, she leaned back in her chair, regarding him thoughtfully. "On purpose, maybe? I'll bet you could have chased me off if you really applied yourself; I'm probably not *that* unflappable."

"No." He shook his head. "Not on purpose, Doctor." Taking a seat in the chair opposite her desk, he went on. "Before we make any agreement, I must be sure you really understand how dangerous an undertaking this is. I am not a safe person to know, Dr. Lambert. *Ever.*"

"You seemed safe enough the other night. You could have killed me any time."

"And still could," he insisted, her blunt clarity taking him off-guard yet again. "Before either of us knows what has happened. Don't ever doubt that."

She studied him for a long moment, finally replying, "I have to doubt it. The evidence says otherwise. Injured, confused, apparently starving, you went for the cooler instead of me. How am I supposed to believe you'd suddenly turn around and attack me without warning?"

"It has been known to happen."

"Yeah? When?"

The instinct to keep his secrets to himself was screaming at him, but he had to make her understand if he was going to let her endanger herself. "Too many times to count, Doctor."

"When?" she repeated firmly.

"Not in a hundred years," he admitted. "But that is not a vow that's easily kept."

"A hundred years?" she repeated. "So why are you so worried about me in particular?"

He could have given her a hundred reasons for that, but something in the way she asked the question stopped him short. One of the things that made her so unpredictable had just clarified itself: Here was a beautiful woman who was honestly oblivious to that fact. What she was really asking was— *why would I be special?* And there was no false modesty here; she really didn't know. How had this jaded world produced such a person?

"Because you should be afraid and you're not," he answered finally. "Fear may be based on ignorance, but it is also a safety net. I meant what I said: keep your distance."

"All right." She nodded, digesting this. "So why did you come back?"

He considered the question for a moment. "I'm not really sure," he admitted finally. "Several reasons, I suppose. Because I wanted to make sure you wouldn't do anything foolish. Because it is nice to lie to myself once in a while and pretend I'm not completely alone." He shrugged. "Because I do want very much to believe you can help me— which doesn't mean I do," he added hastily.

A broad grin lit her face, reminding him that she was really not beyond youthful impetuosity, however well she might conceal it behind a very professional facade. "So you *do* know how to smile," she accused impishly. "You should try it more often. It suits you."

"All right." Had he really become so grim? "Though I've had little to smile about in a long time."

"Guess we'll have to change that." Her smile faded almost out of existence, and the look in her eyes was openly challenging. "I meant what I said, too: You're *not* evil. You're not hopeless. You got a raw deal, and I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be reversible."

"But you don't see any reason why it should, either," he pointed out. "And I haven't yet agreed to let you try."

She nodded. "All right, then. Am I being tested?"

"I suppose you are. Does that bother you?"

She thought about that a moment. "Not really."

Leaning on the desk, he replied seriously, "It should. What right have I to judge you?"

"As much right as anyone else." She shrugged. "I am asking you to trust me on something pretty heavy-duty."

"And in return you're trusting me with your life," he reminded her again. He was still afraid she didn't take that danger as seriously as she should, but he didn't know how else to convince her without really frightening her away. And he knew he no longer wanted to do that—if indeed it was possible, which he was beginning to doubt.

"Looks that way."

"Then I'll have to work hard to be worthy of that," he told her solemnly. In a lighter tone, he went on, "Your turn, Doctor. What are *you* doing here?"

Chuckling, she translated, "What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this, you mean?"

"Something like that," he acknowledged, her humor infecting him. "Surely your desire to help is not limited to me, but your.... patients here are a bit beyond help. Usually," he added as an afterthought.

"Yeah, well, they don't talk back," she returned flippantly. "Usually."

"I see."

The neutral statement earned a puzzled look from her, reminding him again of a questioning child. "I admit it's not the most glamorous occupation, but like I said, I love solving puzzles. And these puzzles help put killers away when I do." With a flash of a sour expression, she added, "Anyway, I don't need to do this to see what people can do to each other. Not these days. So it really doesn't matter much."

Nick suspected that she still hadn't given him the real reason, but he let it go for now, saying instead, "You don't make a very convincing cynic, Dr. Lambert."

"Maybe not," she acknowledged with a smile. "So, I'm not a good cynic, and you do in fact possess a smile. So maybe we should both stop wasting energy on the very aloof and serious routine?"

Nick quirked an eyebrow at her. "Do you really think that's wise?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," she shot back. "I think I'll stand a much better chance of being able to help you when we stop playing verbal chess and start working together."

He regarded her for a long moment, sternly forbidding his mouth to curl up in a smile— and failing. "But it's a game you seem to excel at, Doctor."

"Yeah, well, we can't always like what we're good at. I'm not big on games in general." The self-deprecating almost-smile that accompanied the statement seemed to be an expression her face fell into easily, one Nick suspected she wore more often than any other he had seen. "And it's Natalie."

"Natalie," he repeated, uneasy about establishing first-name familiarity but seeing little choice. "Then I'm Nicho— Nick."

This prompted the gamine grin again, the one so completely at odds with her peculiar profession. The one he found a bit too appealing for comfort. "Hey, you have a smile *and* a name! You'll be human in no time!"

"If only it were that easy."

"We'll do it," Natalie assured him— and, he suspected, herself.

* * *

"Well, Sidney, I think we may have made a start."

The grey tabby answered her with a sleepy blink, clearly finding her announcement less than earth-shattering.

"You're impressed," Natalie chuckled, scooping up the cat from his place on the couch and scratching under his chin. "I can tell. But *you* try consulting with a cagey vampire sometime."

A vampire. There was no denying Nick's anomalous existence, for all that it ran contrary to what she had always been told. All other puzzles in her reach paled in comparison to the chance to try to understand a vampire.

Not merely to understand him, either, but to find a way to erase those anomalies and return him to the state of grace he considered humanity to be. A tall order, that one; in fact, he still wasn't convinced that it was possible.

And, for all her put-on confidence, neither was she. Still, she hadn't made him any promises she couldn't keep. She had only told him she'd try.

That was all Nick expected of her, but Natalie knew that she could not just try. She *would* solve this puzzle, the greatest of her life. She *would* give him back his humanity.

* * *

"I don't mean to be judgmental, Natalie, but don't you have any cheerier places to spend your time?"

The coroner looked around her, at the sickly green tile, the cold stainless-steel furnishings. "I guess it is pretty blah in here, huh?"

Nick stopped himself from saying it didn't seem to suit her; he was finding it increasingly difficult to keep this disarming young woman at a safe, impersonal distance; and that would not help. Instead he suggested, "Maybe we should find a more comfortable place to talk?"

"And leave my secure turf?" she asked in mock horror. Or maybe not so mock, he amended to himself. He had already noted that she seemed to be hiding here from something. "Well, if we *must*... Come on, I live pretty near here. You can meet my cat."

Nick shook his head. "That's not a good idea."

"Oh, Sidney's okay with everybody," she assured him, shrugging out of her lab coat and picking up a light jacket.

"I'm sure Sidney would be fine, but..."

"But what?" She gave him a sidelong glance, lifting an eyebrow. "After surviving a pipe bomb blowing you to bits, you're *not* going to tell me you're allergic to cats?"

That earned an amused half-smile. "No, I'm not allergic. It's just that I'm not... comfortable with the idea of going to your house."

Without missing a beat, she came back with, "Okay. What about yours?"

"Natalie..."

"Didn't think so. It was worth a shot."

"It's for your safety."

Natalie nodded. "So you keep saying."

"What do you mean by that?" Immediately Nick realized the question had been too sharp, as he watched a flash of startlement cross her face before being carefully put away. She really was much too good at that.

"Just that I still have no evidence that you'd hurt me. But we can argue that point until we're both blue in the face— if that's possible for you— and it won't get us anywhere."

"True enough." Nick smiled. "For instance, we still haven't decided on a place to go. A *public* place."

"Where you have an excuse to censor what you tell me?" she challenged, crossing her arms.

Where it's easier to keep you at arm's length, he wanted to answer, but he knew it would do no good. "We'll see," he allowed.

"Okay, okay." Hooking her purse over her shoulder, she dug through its treacherous depths for several seconds, at last fishing out her keys. "There's an ice cream place a couple blocks away that's open until 11."

* * *

Natalie was hard-pressed not to burst out laughing at the look on Nick's face when she held out the cone of fudge ripple. "Have you *tried*?"

"Not ice cream." He shrugged. "A few other things, when circumstances gave me no choice. It may interest you that my gag reflex is alive and well."

"I'll put it in my notes," she chuckled.

Nick's sudden scowl at this surprised her. "Notes can be found, Natalie. Remember: however you plan to go about this... course of treatment, you *must* work in absolute secrecy."

He offered no more, but Natalie couldn't help thinking it was the same tone he used when harping on the issue of her safety.

"Don't worry; I'm not in a rush to be led into a nice white room, thanks." *And besides,* she added to herself, *this is* my *puzzle.* She neither wanted nor expected recognition from her peers, certainly not for this surreal little enigma; what she wanted was the answer.

Nick's severe expression melted as suddenly as it had appeared. "Of course not. I'm sorry. But I really can't exaggerate how important that is. A *whisper* of this gets out, and I can guarantee you will never see me again."

Natalie nodded. "I figured that was the deal."

"So long as we're both clear on it." He watched her work at the ice cream cone for several seconds before asking, "What does that taste like, anyway?"

She held it out to him again, and he eyed it uncertainly. "Go on, it's not going to kill you." Dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she added, "At least, Bram Stoker never mentioned ice cream."

"Well, he wasn't *entirely* on the mark," Nick chuckled. "But no, ice cream is *not* on the list."

This time she did crack up, as he accepted the cone, gingerly attempting to take a lick of it and looking for all the world as if it were laced with ground glass rather than chocolate. "Oh, give me that!" she sputtered finally, snatching it back before it dripped everywhere. "Well, I certainly see where we can start!"

His stricken look at the prospect of further food experiments sent Natalie into renewed laugher, and a second later he joined her.

When both had settled down, she pulled the conversation back to a serious note. "Nick, listen: if we're going to discuss your case in confidentiality, it's got to be in private. That means either we go back to the lab, or one of us is going to have to play host. If we can't talk, I can't help you. It's as simple as that."

The ancient eyes regarded her across the table for a long, uncomfortable moment; but she refused to back down, to look away. "All right," he conceded at last. "And since I would rather trust you with my address than trust myself with yours, I guess it will have to be me."

* * *

"You *live* here?"

After all that had happened in the past few days, he hadn't expected this to throw her. "By your definition, I guess so." He shrugged. "I reside here. If I say anything else, I'm going to start an argument."

"If you're going to insist on believing you're not alive, you'd better get used to arguments," Natalie returned tartly. "This looks like a storage space, not an apartment! How long have you lived here?"

"About a year and a half."

"And in a year and a half you couldn't get furniture?" She shook her head, surveying the spare loft. "No wonder you almost forgot how to smile."

"Vampires in general are very wrapped up in surrounding themselves with *things*," he explained. "I've had enough of that. This is all I need."

"A mattress, a shower stall, and some boxes. Nick, has it occurred to you that *humans* like to have a few things too? Like where are we going to sit?"

"I don't usually have company," he countered.

"Yeah? Maybe you should start." She looked around again, wrinkling her nose. "After you make this place habitable, that is. I assume you have the money, if you can afford the alarm system."

Exasperated, he replied, "Of course I have the money! I have more money that I know what to do with! But—" He stopped short at the triumphant little smile she was failing to hide. "You're *trying* to start an argument!" he accused.

"And succeeding." Natalie perched on a nearby crate with a thoroughly exasperating smile. "The dead don't argue, Nick. Trust me, I've met a lot of 'em."

Privately he reflected that he had known some *very* argumentative dead in his time; but since he was beginning to think Natalie Lambert could give any of them a run for their long-standing Swiss accounts, he let the thought pass. "Fine," he challenged. "Do scientists generally argue with their puzzles?"

Her face fell, and he wondered whether he had made a dreadful mistake.

"I'm sorry," she ventured, carefully holding her dignity together. "I shouldn't let my... enthusiasm get ahead of my professional courtesy." She stood up, continuing in the same artificial doctor's tone, "But *you* are a patient; your *condition* is the puzzle. And as such, you deserve to be—"

"No," he interrupted. "Don't do that." At her puzzled look, he continued, "Don't be the perfect doctor. Joke, argue, enthuse all you want. Be *human*."

He had taken her hand in both his own, the first time he had dared to touch her in friendship rather than an attempt to frighten her away, and for a second he considered letting go— but only a second. "Be alive. *That's* what I need, that example. That's what I'd forgotten."

For a moment she just stared at him, mystified; then the coolly professional veneer was gone, replaced by the slightly-shy smile as warm as his distant memory of sunshine. "That makes sense. But I'll bet you haven't forgotten as much as you think."

"We'll see." He wasn't yet sure he believed she could accomplish the task she had set for herself, but *something* had changed tonight. Whatever it was, this woman was the catalyst, and it was as irrevocable as the choices that had brought him into the darkness.

Maybe more so.

— The Beginning —

[and now, a word from our sponsors...]

Janette's Position Guide
By Sharon S. Scott

I'd really like to have Janette's job— I wonder if she has a job description (or "Position Guide" as they're now calling it where I work). If she does, I wonder how the following items are described:

1. Standing around looking gorgeous in slinky black dresses;
2. Providing a hiding place for police detectives who're in trouble;
3. Being bored to tears listening to police detectives who're in trouble talk, and talk, and talk;
4. Keeping police detectives who're in trouble out of the wine(?) cellar;
5. Keeping Alma & Spike in line;
6. Reassuring vampires who're hanging upside down in wine cellar closets;
7. Waiting around for Nickolah to come tell her what a rotten person she is, then kissing her;
8. Acting as Toronto central clearinghouse for information on computer hackers, various lowlives, Nick's whereabouts, LaCroix's location, etc., etc.;
9. Saving Nick from accupuncturists and from vamping out while he's getting drunk on her Private Reserve;
10. Saving Morticia Addams-lookalikes from Nick.

Heart Within the Beast

by Lisa McDavid

Lisa writes: Just to avoid confusion, this is a sort of Forever Knight: the Next Generation *story. We're in San Francisco, about thirty years in the future. When I wrote "Coming Across," for Issue #1 of* Forever Net, *I didn't deal with LaCroix's reaction to Nick's escaping to mortality, and to Nat, because I didn't know that he wasn't dead. After I found out, I started to wonder what form his revenge would take. "Heart within the Beast" is what I came up with.*

The LaCroix of this story is the Menelaos that Karin Welss created in "Heart of Darkness". Roland d'Agincourt, Kim, and Sharibet appear by permission of their creator, Marian Huntsman Gibbons.

Part 1

He stepped onto the campus just as twilight faded to true night. The street lamps caught the pale mane, cut in the likeness of the crest his helmet had borne more than a millennium before, and set cold fire to it. Nothing in the dark clothes returned the light, as he stood waiting in the shadows.

* * *

It had taken longer than Cat had planned to get back to the campus after her nap. She had thought about not going. Only, Greg would take it as a personal slight if he didn't see her in the audience for his early music concert. Cat had sighed, dragged herself up and into the first suitable clothes in the closet, and made her way to the BART station. It wasn't until she was coming out at the Berkeley stop that she realized what her subconscious mind had done. Greg didn't like the midnight-sky blouse she was wearing, and he had once threatened to burn the skirt that went with it. Cat grinned to herself. Maybe she'd better stop telling herself that a break-up would be too much on top of the general disillusionment with the academic world. No, better yet, let her outfit tell Greg.

She hurried past the Faculty Grove, toward Morrison Hall, not seeing the watcher in the shadow-enhanced darkness. He smiled, as he fell silently into step some twenty feet behind her. The light struck cold fire again from his hair, but his smile was colder as he followed her.

* * *

The smaller performance space was on the second floor. Cat had seated herself on the far side of the playing platform, next to someone. He didn't bother to notice details such as gender or appearance. Instead he focused on Cat's seatmate's eyes, and thought. Content didn't matter, as long as it didn't spill sideways and alarm his quarry.

More than sixteen hundred years of the hunt ensured a perfect hit. The person beside Cat rose abruptly and moved away. Continuing to project, just to discourage anyone with ambitions for a place nearer the front, he strolled at leisure around the edge of the platform to claim the seat.

Cat continued her study of the program. She was frowning at something. Idly he wondered why. That fabric suited her, and he approved of the way the darker threads in the pattern made it appear to be in secret motion. Her father had had that kind of appreciation of the subtle. He looked down at the single throwaway sheet, trying to see what was preempting Cat's attention. Nothing was visible to account for it.

His most charming smile formed itself on his lips; he even allowed it into his eyes. He said, with apparent concern, "Is something wrong?"

Cat looked at her neighbor. An interesting type: a crest of hair too white to be natural, pale blue eyes. Vampires were always interesting. She hadn't seen one this close for years, although she had occasionally passed one in the street. She smiled back and replied, "Wrong? Not really. It's just that Greg will insist on playing his solution to the Antonnini puzzle piece."

"Is there something wrong with it?" The watcher had never been close enough to look into his target's eyes. Somehow he had not expected them to be so large, and so dark a brown. Above all, he had not expected to find himself listening to her response as though it mattered.

"It makes a pleasant noise, but then Antonnini usually does. Greg can't have the right readings, because why should Antonnini bother to encode something that ordinary?" Cat spoke casually, but her internal antennae were quivering. Not only was he a vampire, he was focused on her. Cat repressed a smile. Telling him that projective hypnotism didn't work on her would only lead to unfortunate consequences the minute she was alone. No doubt it would be equally unwise to inquire whether he had known Antonnini during the Venetian Renaissance. Instead she asked," Not everybody knows about puzzle music— are you a musicologist?"

"Of sorts— amateur division only," he answered. "Is that your department?"

"No, early music's just a hobby of mine. I'm in Physics." Cat, who had her namesake's compulsion to investigate, was perfectly aware that he was trying to charm her. Now, why? she wondered. He wouldn't need to come into a crowd to hunt. The Bay Area attracted droves of street people. Besides, she had seen hungry vampires before, and he wasn't looking for food. Of that she was certain.

He hadn't expected to be fenced with. She was considering him; he hadn't survived more than sixteen centuries without developing an instinct for his prey's reactions. If she had been merely dinner, he would have sheered off, no matter how inviting the curve of her lips, and the unusual fairness of her skin. She had an unusual shade of voice, too. She was probably a mezzo— damnation, he would keep his mind on his plan! He said, "What sort of physics, Ms, or is it Doctor..."

"Dr. Knight, Mister...?" She could easily be traced through the university catalog. Besides, some bait would be needed if she wanted his current alias.

"LaCroix."

* * *

The performance ended in an encore for which he had not applauded. Cat, applauding because she was visible from the stage, couldn't blame him. She had seen his eyebrows rise faintly at her objections to the Antonnini piece, and she had not expected more than a civil response. The fact that it was markedly uncivil didn't really surprise her. Tact wasn't a vampire trait. She had suppressed a grin when LaCroix folded his arms and sat as if posing for a cigar store Indian. She got to her feet and threaded her way backstage.

The young man, Greg, had changed back to street clothes by the time LaCroix insinuated himself behind the public areas. His violin lay discarded in its case, while he argued with one of the winds about the next rehearsal time. LaCroix's lips curled. Really, a very commonplace young man, with no extraordinary talent, and to leave an instrument of that caliber unprotected ought to be a capital crime.

Cat was examining a facsimile Antonnini edition. Suddenly she sat up sharply. "That's it! It's got to be!"

"Really, Cat, not now—" Greg began.

LaCroix was at her side without, to all appearances, having moved from the door. "The *Doriana*?" he asked.

"Yes!" Cat's grin wrinkled her nose. "Look, if you assume it isn't the way the music fits around the columns in the temple, it's the decoration on the capitals..." She put the book on the piano and began to finger the keys. "It's a scale, and then if you assume a relationship between the columns, you get—"

"You get a lot of nonsense! Honestly, Cat, it's not a piano piece," Greg's tone was condescending, and he snatched the score out of her hands. "And you don't even play the violin."

"I do." LaCroix used his voice like a half-drawn sword. Greg relinquished the book. LaCroix took Greg's violin from its case. "You read me the notes as you think Gia— Antonnini, meant them." Cat began to do so. He played after her, slowly at first, then, as the plan became clear, more swiftly, until he was playing alone.

The entire backstage crowd, except Cat, stared. LaCroix appeared not to notice. After he finished the last note he unhurriedly replaced the instrument, rewrapped it, and fastened the latches on the case. Various individuals crowded forward, retreated or exclaimed to their neighbors. No one approached LaCroix. It was unnecessary to do anything as dramatic as snarl. Even in his mortal days most people had not cared to approach LaCroix unbidden.

He saw to it that no one remembered his exit from the room.

Cat and Greg were outside, under one of the trees. LaCroix slipped into the shadows to listen unseen. The conversation did not appear to be congratulatory.

"No, I'm not going to apologize!" Cat's tone was level. LaCroix smiled to himself. So she'd inherited that trait, had she? When Nick spoke like that, even vampires thought twice. "Did I tell him to take your toy away from you? Grow up, Greg."

"Toy? That's my violin, and if you think I'm going to hand it out to any stranger who takes your fancy— Or is he a stranger?"

Cat's fists clenched. "Would you like to explain that statement in words of one syllable?" She spoke almost softly. Behind her, LaCroix's smile became a grin. Just about now, Nick's eyes would have begun to transform to vampire gold.

"I mean I've wondered if you were sleeping around on me, and now I'm sure of it! Cat's the right name for you; I'm just surprised you bother to go home and get inside before you—" Greg never heard his adversary behind him. The hand that suddenly clutched his shoulder hurt.

He gasped, "What the hell?"

"Tell me, young Greg," inquired LaCroix in a tone which reminded Cat of dark silk, "do you plan to go on fiddling?" His captive gasped out a bewildered affirmative. "Then you'll need a course in manners. We'll begin by apologizing to the lady. Sincerely."

Greg managed to stammer something incoherent about being sorry. Cat looked past him at the vampire. "Let him go, please, Mr. LaCroix. He's close enough to sorry; regret's not worth a broken shoulder."

She turned her attention to the younger man, who was trying to raise the opposite hand to his collarbone without putting down the instrument case. "It's certainly not worth risking damage to the violin. He's got a Guaranari, in case you didn't know."

Cat possessed herself of the case. "Come on, Greg. You can't drive home like that unless you want to make it worse. Give me your car card." The reply was only half-audible, even to LaCroix, but the card was surrendered, and the unhappy couple began walking toward Bancroft Avenue.

LaCroix stood looking after them until they were out of sight. His hair still blazed in the security lights, but something more than shadow darkened his eyes. Finally he moved backward, into the darkness.

* * *

In the second floor drawing room of a Victorian house, a young, blonde woman who would have been tawdrily pretty if she hadn't been pouting, strode restlessly around a room on the top floor. If any of the neighbors happened to look out, none would stare at the lighted window. Number 15 had a reputation for unpleasant hauntings. No one could remember anyone living there. The occasional inquirer, over the years, had been told that it was tied up in a disputed estate. Persistent inquirers had strange accidents. Few people now admitted interest.

"Faithful to your instructions!" said LaCroix, coming into the room. "How commendable." He was carrying something that looked like a bottle of wine, which he set on a table. The young woman hastily got glasses and corkscrew from a cabinet. Decanting the blood into a glass, she raised it to her lips.

LaCroix allowed one eyebrow to rise slightly. "Really, Alexandra, you're forgetting your origins. Since when does a barmaid serve herself first?"

Sulkily Alexandra handed the first glass to her master, then poured herself a second. Cat would have replied with something razor-edged, LaCroix thought. He was speculating on the form Cat's hypothetical retort might have taken before he realized what he was doing. The glass shattered in his hand. He swore at Alexandra as she automatically began to clear the shards away and mop up.

Thirty years of vengeance honed as carefully as a master chess play were not going to be deferred because the pawn happened to solve a mystery which had been created in a wager with LaCroix himself. Gianmarco Antonnini had won the wager, and with it the aristocratic Venetian patroness of the arts whom LaCroix had planned to bring over himself. Taking a replacement glass of blood from Alexandra, LaCroix wondered where Gianmarco was these days. He had last been heard of in Capri, but it had been a couple of centuries since he had heard a rumor of Vittoria del Orsin. Someone had told Janette that she had taken to devout fits in which she tried to force her way into rectories, since she dared not enter a church, looking for absolution from a priest. Janette had remarked that these ventures were more likely to end in absorption from the hapless cleric. LaCroix smiled to himself. Cat would enjoy that line.

This time some of the blood spilled, but the glass stayed intact. Damnation! By all the pantheon of darkness, he did not care what his prey would enjoy. He did not! He snarled at Alexandra, "What are you hanging about for? I thought I told you that you could go hunt."

"You just said to wait up for you," Alexandra sniffed.

LaCroix supposed the release of knocking her through the glass doors onto the porch behind them wouldn't be worth the annoyance of getting repairs done. "Must I tell you to put one foot in front of the other? If I'd known just what a cow's brain you really are, I'd never have played that joke on Nick!"

Alexandra stared blankly at him. "But it hasn't been played yet. Nick won't come to San Francisco until after I've killed his daughter."

He couldn't imagine Cat's wide, dark eyes empty like that. LaCroix took a long drink.

Alexandra frowned. "Nick won't come to San Francisco until after I've killed his daughter," she repeated; "we haven't played the trick yet."

The glass slammed down on the table beside LaCroix's chair. Cat had never seen him before tonight, yet they had not needed an extra word to play out the notes of Gianmarco's puzzle.

A reluctant smile stole across his lips. Cat's hair was the color of the oldest and finest gold in his collections. It had shone even in the harsh fluorescent lights backstage. He had remembered playing duets with Nick, when the piano was a new, novelty instrument. He had never liked keyboard instruments, but Nick had been fascinated from the day their furnished lodgings in Florence had happened to include a pianoforte.

Cat had beautiful hands. He wondered what it would be like to feel her fingers tracing the planes of his face. He would catch and hold them, carry them to his lips—

Damnation! LaCroix's eyes blazed gold. He stood up, snarling at Alexandra. "Come here!" Before she could move he strode across the room and wrenched her into his arms.

The pain was as vicious as LaCroix's bite. Unaroused, she could only bear the agony while he drank, willing herself not to faint until her master was filled.

Alexandra staggered, reeling. LaCroix snarled again as he caught her by the shoulders. Without bothering to carry her, he half led, half dragged her across the hall to his bedroom, and threw her onto the bed.

* * *

Alexandra lay beside her master, not daring to move, lest he awaken. She bit her lips against the pain and the need to cry. LaCroix didn't like being awakened, and he liked crying even less. He called it snivelling; it invariably earned her a slap.

The physical pain was no worse than usual. In fact, it was less. Alexandra shut her eyes against another onslaught of tears. The master-convert link between them travelled both ways. He had been thinking of Cat the entire time.

Suppose he broke his promise? He was always telling her she could do something, and then not letting her! Suppose he brought Cat over, and put her in Alexandra's stead?

Alexandra remembered some of the places she'd had to live, the other masters she'd served while LaCroix went merrily on his way for years at a time with Nick and Janette.

He'd promised, the last time she'd had to crawl back to him, that he'd never do that to her again. She'd wanted to believe him. Well, he was twice the fool he kept calling her if he thought she believed him now about Cat Knight! She'd never let him take Cat and replace her, never!

Part 2

Cat stood for a moment, after she had locked her front door behind her. The house on the edge of Noe Valley was quiet at this hour, but to Cat's aching head everything seemed to be pounding. Greg was probably still shouting, she thought bitterly. He hadn't run out of breath or ammunition from the minute the car pulled away from the curb.

"All right, that's enough. We're through, Greg. Over. *Finito*," Cat had told him as soon as they reached his apartment building, yanking the card out of the dashboard and shoving it hard into his hand. It was the one on the side LaCroix had wrenched. Greg yelped and jerked away. Cat permitted herself a flash of malicious triumph as she walked away.

Getting home at this hour, with the infrequent trains on BART after midnight, had taken time. Malice had dwindled to depression during the long ride home. She'd cry later. At the moment all she wanted was Tylenol and her bed.

The day's mail was still lying on the counter top where she had thrown it. The top envelope was university stationery, containing her contract letter for the coming academic year.

It was the standard form, with a slight raise, needing to be countersigned and returned to the president's office. She had known it was coming. What she still didn't know was whether to sign it.

Somehow she hadn't pictured academic life as a series of political mazes. She'd heard about faculty meetings, but nobody had told her that the speeches at them resembled the Chinese water torture. Most of all, Cat, always the responsible, achieving student, had never bargained for time-servers dragging classes down to their levels.

Cat stared at the envelope for a moment, then she thrust it into the top drawer of her desk. Before she got out of her makeup or into her nightgown, she found the bottle of Tylenol, retrieved half a bottle of wine from the back of the refrigerator, and poured herself approximately twice her usual ration. She huddled on the window seat, washing the two tablets down with the wine.

Her watch read 2:13 a.m., too late to call home. Besides they'd know something was wrong, even if she didn't break down. Her parents hadn't liked Greg during their visit to San Francisco. Cat was sure her mother had restrained her father from asking her not to have any more to do with him. He'd have been right, of course, but that didn't mean admitting it was going to be easy.

Her headache was getting worse; the Tylenol wasn't doing much good. Cat rose with a sigh from the window seat and started to get ready for bed. The special scented candle that had come from a shop in Chinatown might help. Cat had always found it soothing. She set it on a plate in the middle of a bowl of water, just in case she fell asleep with it burning, and got into bed.

As she drifted off, she thought that the candle smelled like the hearth used to when Daddy lit one of his special fires, with the logs treated to burn in colors, while Cat and Jeffrey cuddled up to be told stories.

There were grotesque dwarfs carved on each side of the fireplace. The little girl Cat had been afraid of the way they came to life in the firelight, until the night she woke up screaming that her bedposts had turned into the dwarfs.

Her mother had turned the lights on to show Cat that the bedposts were just bedposts, but Daddy lay down next to her for the rest of the night, and told her a story about a little girl who was named Kitty-Cat, which by an odd coincidence was just exactly what Daddy called her.

Kitty-Cat was always running into monsters, only she always won because she knew the secret to being brave. Monsters only bothered little girls who acted afraid. Kitty-Cat used to tell the monsters to go away, and if they didn't, why, she'd just get the scrub bucket from the kitchen and dump water over them. One day Kitty-Cat repelled an entire army of trolls with the garden hose, and won so many medals that she couldn't stand up if she wore all of them.

Tears stung Cat's eyes. "Yes, but what kind of water do I use for breaking up with Greg, and not wanting to go on with teaching?" She hid her face against her pillow.

* * *

The moon was almost full. When it had risen halfway up the sky, a phantom handful of rays shone through the gap in the curtains to touch Cat's face. She stirred, whimpering, in her sleep, as she became again a child crouched in the ruins of a half-burnt factory while the vampire lady's teeth pierced her brother's neck.

Cat bit her lip, just as she had when the vampire lady was flying away with her and Jeffrey, and fought hard to be brave Kitty-Cat. Was there water here? Maybe there was some ice.

All she could see was wood, like the old cross that Daddy kept in the closet in his and Mommy's room, the one where Cat had found the doll that she had been named Catherine for. Erica had told her where to look. Where was Erica? She had gone for Daddy. What if she couldn't find Daddy? Erica couldn't always make Daddy hear her. Mommy always thought Cat was making it up when Cat told her what Erica said.

The vampire's eyes were glaring as gold as her hair. Cat stared back. The lady glided toward her. Cat tried to stand up. She almost fell. She clutched at the floor, and came up holding a sharp piece of charred wood out in front of her. The lady stopped. "Put that down," she snapped.

"No!" said Cat. She flourished the stick, and the vampire lady backed away.

Then Cat knew. Her sitter liked to watch scary movies on the late show, when she thought Cat was asleep upstairs. In the movies people killed vampires with a stake in the heart. Only, how could a little girl, even a little girl who never acted scared, reach high enough to stab a grown-up?

The vampire lady seemed to catch Cat's thoughts. She laughed, and stretched out her hands. "Put it down and come here!"

Cat backed away instead. Her foot almost slipped on another piece of wood. She was about to kick it aside, when she remembered what else vampires were afraid of.

Snatching the second piece of wood, Cat held it and the first one up in the shape of a cross. The lady flinched backward, with a hiss, flinging one hand up in front of her face.

The door to what had been the factory's main floor crashed open. Daddy's voice shouted their names.

Cat screamed, "Daddy!" and pushed the cross at the lady.

Something black slammed past Cat and crashed into the vampire lady as Daddy snatched Cat up and hugged her so hard it hurt.

"Nee-co-lah!" Janette cried, struggling with the mean lady, who was trying to get through the door onto the roof of the main floor. "Help me!"

Daddy let Cat go and sprang to help. Erica appeared at Cat's side. Cat sobbed, "Jeffrey!"

Erica knelt beside the little boy. "He isn't dead, Cat," she said. "He's just unconscious. He'll be all right. See, he's breathing."

Gray light showed through the doorway. Daddy pulled the mean lady through the door into the nearly risen sun, and slammed it. One terrible scream tore the air. Then Daddy and Aunt Janette were beside Cat, and Daddy was picking up Jeffrey. Cat stared at him. She hadn't known daddies cried. She told Daddy, "He's not dead. Erica said so," just as Janette said "Nee-co-lah, he's breathing."

The shadows deepened in the bedroom in San Francisco. Cat, still half in the nightmare's grip, opened her eyes and stared unseeing at the ceiling.

* * *

For the next two evenings Cat watched for LaCroix. That chance had seated him beside her at the concert she did not for a minute believe. He thought she didn't know who he was, of course.

Her parents had never been told that Janette had failed to hypnotize the kidnapping out of Cat's memory. It had worked on Jeffrey, once he was well enough to be visited in the hospital. Cat had simply looked up at Janette, wide-eyed, when the power was beamed at her. "You're a vampire." It had been a statement, not a question.

Janette gasped something in French, and tried again.

"Was Daddy a vampire, too?" Cat asked. Janette had been fastening Cat's pajamas; the top button snapped off.

She said, "That's not nice to ask," and began looking for another pajama top.

"But I don't want to be nice," protested Cat. "I want to know if Daddy used to be a vampire."

Janette had burst into laughter, and until the day Janette left Toronto, eleven years later, Cat's knowledge had formed a secret bond with her. The other children were simply appendages of their father to Janette: Cat was an individual in her own right. When Cat overheard the name LaCroix spoken between her parents after one of Daddy's nightmares, it was Janette who explained.

By the third night Cat considered going to Janette's new club in the Haight, the latest in a succession of Ravens which Janette had run in various cities for most of a century. Her parents had not really wanted Cat to take this job halfway across North America. Her father had protested strongly, until her mother reminded him that Janette was in San Francisco now, and would surely help Cat in an emergency. Cat hadn't been intended to overhear, she knew, and she hadn't wanted anyone's help.

She certainly didn't want help now. If she went to see Janette, help was just exactly what she'd get, wanted or not. She was the one being played for a fool, and she was going to be the one who rescued herself.

* * *

LaCroix was too experienced a hunter to lose patience. He stayed out of Cat's sight. She might be suspicious if she encountered him again too soon without a good reason.

He had to make sure of a good vantage point. That was why he was arriving early at Morrison Hall on the fourth night, he told himself. It was important to be in the front. He might want to influence her.

LaCroix's research had been thorough. He could have written a short biography of Cat Knight, and he could easily have graphed her schedule. The Musica Renata mailings which appeared regularly in her box had suggested music as a cover for his stalking.

He had not known, however, until he looked at the program that she was a soloist, or... "I knew it! A mezzo."

He remembered when tonight's cantata was new, and he remembered the voice for which the solo had been composed. Did Cat know that the dangerous register change in the repeat had been placed to show off that singer's favorite trick? Could she do it as easily?

* * *

On the stage, Cat's fingers were locked onto a fold of her gown. She was trying to control her breathing, since her heartbeat was a lost cause. Why had she ever let Greg talk her into this? It had been all very well for him to promise her, then, that he wouldn't let her fail, he'd cover for her. She hadn't spoken to him since the break-up. He was elaborately favoring his right arm, and seemed to blame her for it. His last action tonight before stepping onto the podium had been to throw her a murderous glare.

The cantata quickened to the solo. Cat grabbed her note the second before Greg cut it in half, to make a perfect entrance. His second trick came a line later, as he "forgot" a retard. Cat, watching closely, matched him, but her fingers tightened on her dress. Greg was determined to make her fail, as if her own nerves weren't traitor enough, and that jump between registers was coming up.

In the front row, LaCroix had realized what was happening the minute Greg tried to subvert Cat's first measure. His own fists clenched, and for one red-hazed moment he wanted to leap onto the stage. He should have finished breaking the young swine's shoulder two nights ago. The retard was omitted. LaCroix needed only one glance at Cat's eyes to know that the piece had not been rehearsed this way.

Very well, Greg Whatever-Your-Name-May-Be, your fiddling days will be over after I finish with you tonight. In the meantime... Damn it, it was happening again! He did not care what Greg did to her. Anything that unsettled her would make her an easier target.

Greg's final sabotage came just before the register break. He began rushing the tempo. Cat would never be able to manage at that rate.

Since when did LaCroix like things to be easier? Cat was his prey! He would brook no interference. He glared at the back of the conductor's head. Greg staggered, seemed to catch himself, and resumed following the score precisely as written. Cat aced the register change and made a triumphant finish.

On stage Cat released her grip on her gown, and allowed her relief to light her smile. The chorus moved onto the third section. Greg seemed to be conducting in a daze. Cat automatically worried, and was brought up sharply by the realization that Greg's problems were no longer hers. So why was she suddenly so depressed that she had to hold back tears?

* * *

"Aren't you going to the reception?" one of Cat's friends asked as she turned toward the outside door, instead of the downstairs room where the party was scheduled.

"Not really," said Cat. "I'm not sure I wouldn't break one of the wine bottles over Greg's head."

"Do it and we'll all alibi you! Come on, Cat, Greg'll love it if he thinks he's driven you off." She started to add that none of Cat's friends had ever known what Cat saw in Greg anyway, but thought better of it.

Cat sighed. "Oh, all right," she said, and capitulated.

The reception room was already full. Cat stood for a moment just inside the door, trying to spot Greg so that she could avoid him.

Yes, there he was, in one corner, having what appeared to be a heated argument with several members of the Board of Directors. Cat hastily turned away, before she was drawn in by eye contact, and found herself looking across the room at LaCroix.

He stood alone near the early instruments exhibit, scanning the explanation cards with a sardonic twist to his mouth. Cat found herself thinking of panthers and electricity arcing out of control.

Suddenly she was blind with rage. What right had LaCroix to insinuate himself into her life to hurt her, just because she represented his ancient quarrel with her father? "The all-powerful master vampire, are you?" she thought angrily. "You're nothing but a jumped-up tick! And I'm the one who's going to apply the match."

Part 3

She joined him beside the exhibit case. He turned, somewhat disconcerted at the directness of her approach. The objects of his pursuit generally stood in blissful ignorance, or fled. LaCroix allowed himself to smile questioningly.

Cat smiled innocently back. So he was playing her for a fool! "Hello, Mr. LaCroix! I'd say small world, except that it's true in early music. Will you be at the rest of the series?"

"Dr. Knight, isn't it?" he parried. That deep red became her, but it needed something. Flowers at the neckline? Suddenly he remembered a pendant, an heraldic sphinx formed from a baroque black pearl within coral flames. The red in the fire was exactly the same. He hadn't worn it since Venice, or thought of it since happening across it in a list of lost works by Benvenuto Cellini, but it was in his bank in Switzerland. A fantastic idea of lending it to Cat for her next performance flashed across his mind.

"Tell me, do you often have amnesia after helping people solve puzzles?" She saw that he was taken aback, and her smile widened into a nose-wrinkling grin.

Vixen! he thought, and found his own smile, instead of obediently extinguishing itself, answering hers. He knew that look: Nicholas, up to something completely outrageous. "Not when it's the last of the unsolved Antonninis," LaCroix answered. "Are you going to publish it?"

"I suppose I should, but it's out of my field." The ghost of the unsigned contract in her desk rose before her. "But—"

"Cat, congratulations!" The chairman of the Board was bearing down on her, with most of the Board in tow. LaCroix, fading effortlessly into the background, muttered two or three phrases under his breath that he hadn't used since his days as Alexander the Great's most feared mercenary.

Finally he could stand it no longer. To an observer, he appeared to have resumed his study of the instruments in their cases. It might have been coincidence that the crowd around Cat all suddenly developed reasons to be elsewhere.

Cat herself was biting her lips against laughter. Of course he was using the vampire mind control! She would have to find an excuse to ask Janette if all vampires needed to look into the target's eyes. She'd never heard of anyone else being able to do it without eye contact. She stopped, allowing herself to listen. Yes, he was trying to call her. All right, she would flatter his vanity this one time.

LaCroix pretended to be surprised at her return. "Oh, there you are again."

"Of course. This is a new display since the last time I was in here, and it's something I'm interested in." The newness was a lie, but if he wasn't going to fight fair, neither was she. The cases contained variant forms of the lyre, from an ancient model reconstructed, through the later, Germanic bowed type that was the ancestor of the rebec.

"Do you play the lyre?" LaCroix asked.

"No; I've always wanted to, but I've never been able to find a teacher."

There was no response from her companion. Glancing up to see what had distracted him, Cat was surprised to find him watching her with an expression she couldn't identify. For one infinitesimal fraction of a second, the sleek predator was human. Then he caught her gaze. The icy charm returned, but not before Cat had seen that it was a shield instead of a lure.

Did she know? LaCroix wondered. Was this a challenge? No, it couldn't be. Neither Nick nor Janette could have told her about Menelaos, the apprentice lyre-maker. "Do you play anything besides the piano?" he inquired almost at random.

"My father taught me to play the guitar when I was a child," answered Cat. Good! She'd wanted an opening to mention him. "Dad started me on the piano, too."

"Is he a musician?" LaCroix's tone was perfect. Only someone who was listening for it would have known that it was not a casual question.

Cat was listening. "No, actually he's a police detective," she said. Now let him wonder what she knew! "I play Celtic harp, too— I learned that later, from a friend."

LaCroix was abruptly thankful that he had not taken a glass of wine as a prop. Janette played the Celtic harp. "You obviously enjoy music, and you have a magnificent voice." Mentally he swore at himself. He had meant "good" to be the adjective. "May I ask you a personal question, Dr. Knight?"

Opening number two, twelve o'clock high, thought his adversary. "Certainly, but please call me Cat. 'Dr. Knight' is my mother; she's a pathologist." Cat added a politely correct smile.

She must be fencing with him! To cover himself, LaCroix continued with his script. "Cat, then. How is it that you became a physicist rather than a singer?"

"One artist in the family's enough. My sister's the performer; she's got the temperament for it. I'm too serious-minded." Cat was puzzled. Where was he leading? Surely he didn't think she could be lured into a career change in order to fail for his amusement? Besides, that wouldn't be revenge on her father. Had he somehow failed in intelligence-gathering with the rest of the family? He might not know where Jeffrey was doing his residency. Richard was safely at home until he finished his undergraduate degree, but Aurora... Aurie had just started her first season as an apprentice at Stratford, and Aurie didn't have suppressed memories of vampires to draw on for defense.

Cat's temper blazed. If he thought she was going somehow to play Judas goat in a plot against her little sister, LaCroix the Master Vampire had better start guarding himself! She would phone Dad the minute she got home. No, wait. Aurie was the wilful type. Years of experience warned Cat that any attempt of Dad's to protect her would lead to her storming in the opposite direction. Very well then, Cat would take care of the situation.

LaCroix's eyebrows rose. What had he said to anger her? It wouldn't be anything to do with her voice, and clearly Nick hadn't denied her musical training. Her sister was the performer in the family, she'd said, because Cat didn't have the temperament.

Menelaos the Apprentice Lyre-maker of Pergamon, having been evoked, was not easily exorcised. All at once he was Menelaos the abused little boy again, and his father's voice echoed loudly in his memory, shouting all the hurtful things about Laertes' talent, Laertes having been worth everything, and Menelaos being worth nothing.

Nicholas, was it you who taught her to undervalue herself? ...No, that wouldn't be like you, not the way you were always on about wanting children of your own. Very well, what about your wife? It took all his strength of will to force back the vampire rage. LaCroix hated Natalie Lambert Knight. If she hadn't come between them, he would have lured Nick back. He was sure of that; he had never failed before.

It would be like that conniving piece of goods, Nicholas's Saint Natalie, to favor her younger daughter. Hadn't Janette said once that the second daughter was Nick's image? No doubt that had been reason enough to place her above Cat.

Aloud, he said, "And what kind of temperament would that be?"

"You know, just artistic temperament." Cat was not going to give him anything about her sister. She must distract him, but how? "You asked if I played the lyre; do you?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "In fact, it's always been my favorite."

"I suppose it's no use asking where you learned?" Cat was tired of fencing. Besides, he wasn't likely to tell her that he had taken his first lesson more than nine centuries ago. Janette had once, when annoyed with Nick, told Cat that he had been as stubborn as a brick wall for eight hundred years, so LaCroix must be at least as old as that.

"Nowhere near here," said LaCroix. So that was the right bait! "Do you still want to learn?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Cat. All the family acting talent hadn't gone to Aurora. She sounded only casually interested.

"I teach occasionally, if you don't mind coming to my house." Very occasionally! His last pupil had been her father. "I have an unfortunate allergy to sunlight, among other things, that keeps me housebound by day."

Part 4

The music room of the Victorian house LaCroix had owned since his first San Francisco sojourn had been designed as a scaled-down great hall with a minstrel's gallery. Pseudo-moorish fret work carved into its front panel idea made anyone seated on the gallery floor invisible. From it Alexandra, hidden as usual, was watching Cat and LaCroix, as she had watched at each of Cat's lessons.

She had seen Cat challenge LaCroix, and several times she could have sworn that the mortal was deliberately provoking him.

Less than two weeks ago, Alexandra had gloated as Cat followed LaCroix into the library, instead of waiting for him to bring the promised volume. The library was LaCroix's sanctum. Alexandra was never allowed in there except to clean while her master watched impatiently.

When no explosion materialized, she had peeked carefully through the keyhole, fully expecting to find LaCroix crouched over Cat's drained body. Instead, they were sitting at the antique Italian chess set, with its ivory and obsidian pieces, deep in the opening moves of what seemed to Alexandra to be an interminable game.

Now, instead of Cat's going home after her lyre lessons, she was quite likely to stay until all hours of the night, playing chess. Once Cat had actually caught LaCroix in a questionable manoeuver, and had calmly told him so. LaCroix, grinning, had shown her where it was legal under a very obscure point of the rules.

"Tell me, what would you do if you were sure I was cheating?" he asked.

Cat smiled serenely. "Cheat back, of course. Only I'd make sure *I* didn't get caught."

And they had laughed!

Sprawled full-length, this time Alexandra had her master and his pupil directly in her line of sight. Cat was sitting on one of the chairs with an early medieval lyre in her lap. The tune she fingered was very simple, but it was being played surely, and with the right emphases. LaCroix smiled at her. "That's nearly perfect. You're stopping a little too heavily in the bottom register, but practice will take care of that."

Cat tucked her wayward mane behind one ear. "I'll try it again."

"Good girl! Your fingers need a bit more curve." He took her right hand and gently arranged it on the strings. "That's better." He listened with half-closed eyes.

In the gallery, Alexandra saw her master's eyes tinge with the gold of desire. Jealousy stabbed like sunlight. He never spoke to her like that, and she had learned centuries ago to avoid his touch when she could. Alexandra's eyes, themselves gold-tinged, caught fire. She should have ripped Cat Knight's throat out twenty years ago when she'd had the chance!

The score from which Cat was playing had the vocal line with a text in medieval French. Softly, at the last bar of the introduction, she began to sing.

When she had finished the repeat, LaCroix spoke. "You're wasted on a mundane career. Voices like yours shouldn't be hidden away."

Cat shook her head. "I've never wanted to be a professional. Aurie's the one who loves all the ins and outs and intrigues."

"That's rather caustic," LaCroix told her. One eyebrow quirked slightly. "Don't you approve of your sister?"

Mentally Cat cursed herself. Leading him to the subject of her family was exactly what she had *not* intended to do. "It doesn't have anything to do with her," she said sharply.

"Indeed?" Incredulity etched his voice.

"Yes, indeed!" Cat snapped. "I've had to drop out of my early music group, that's all. I don't have Greg's talent for plotting."

He was silent. Surprised, she glanced at him. LaCroix was looking at her with the same inscrutable expression she had seen at the reception after the Musica Renata concert. "Had to?" he asked. "As in *forced*?" He spoke casually, but once again Cat flashed on the image of a panther crouched to spring.

"No, it was my idea. Factions were starting to form, and Greg may be a bastard, but he's a first-class early conductor, so I got out."

LaCroix's fingers tightened on the arm of his chair. "Young Greg wants sorting out." So that was why Cat's attention had wandered tonight, and why he had beaten her so easily in their last chess game.

He had forgotten how much triumph there was in watching an apt pupil develop. And when it came to distracting Cat from her chess... She hadn't beaten him yet, but she was getting there. Nick had taught her well.

If Greg thought he was going to poach in LaCroix's coverts by upsetting Cat, he was very much mistaken, and so he was going to find out as soon as Cat went home.

For just a moment there had been a yellow tinge to her teacher's pale blue eyes. "No, don't!" Cat reacted instinctively. She might wonder what she had ever seen in Greg, but she didn't want him murdered.

"Really?" LaCroix inquired. "Why not?"

Cat reached a little desperately for a rationale. "Because he knows I'm studying with you," she said. It was true. One of the altos, the one who had been after Greg for months, had overheard the invitation at the reception and promptly conveyed the intelligence to Greg. "He can't have forgotten what you did to his shoulder. If you attack him he'll only go to his doctor and get painkillers. This way he'll worry. He's a worrier; he'll put himself through worse psychologically than anything you can do to him physically, because he'll be afraid you have the influence to get him fired."

The vampire's eyes were fixed on her face, as if he had never really seen her before. He said softly, "My dear, that's worthy of Machiavelli." Whose manuscript he had critiqued before it went to the printer; LaCroix wished he could tell Cat. "And he'd be correct. I do have the influence to get him fired."

Not for a moment did Cat doubt it. For one vertiginous instant she felt a thrill of triumph at controlling such power, for it was in her control. A word from her, and— Cat brought herself up sharply. No! Either LaCroix was getting into her mind, or the worst side of her character was showing, but she wasn't going to let either happen. Instead she smiled at him. "There must be better uses for that kind of influence than wasting it on Greg."

LaCroix smiled back. "Name one."

"Oh, front row seats at SF Opera's opening night, for instance." There, that ought to counter him. Any front row tickets for the San Francisco Opera were difficult to get. Opening night would be impossible.

"Done!" he answered, "on one condition, that you wear the red dress you wore for the Renata concert."

Cat was startled, but not too astonished to keep in play. "Done!" she echoed, "on one condition of my own."

"Which is?"

"Just don't kill anyone for the tickets." LaCroix allowed one eyebrow to rise. Cat grinned at him. He found himself grinning back, until both were laughing.

* * *

"Was that her?" asked Alexandra, elaborately casual in her pretense of waking early and wandering onto the landing at the head of the stairs just as the front door was re-bolted.

"You know it was," he answered. "Do you really think I don't hear you spying in the woodwork?" He turned and went into the drawing room without bothering to check that Alexandra followed.

A frown disfigured the vacuously pretty face. "I have to spy! You never tell me anything."

"I prefer to conserve my energies," returned LaCroix. He looked from Alexandra to the decanter and frowned. "For example, I object to giving standing instructions twice." He spoke evenly, but Alexandra hastened to fill a glass and put it into his hand.

"You said I could kill Cat!" Her tone rose to a whine. "She's my prey; you promised!"

LaCroix shook his head. "So much beauty, and so little sense of the aesthetic! A few moments in the street would serve for mere killing."

"Oh, I know, you want Nick to know it was you behind it, even if that Janette does swear it was me, but why do you have to bring her here, and laugh with her, and—"

In one motion LaCroix rose from the chair and struck Alexandra full in the face. She uttered a sob and froze, staring at him.

"Who'd have thought it! Alexandra, I had no idea your intelligence was sufficient for jealousy." Calmly, he resumed his seat. "For your insolence, you may abandon the idea of Cat as your prey. From here on in, she's mine."

Alexandra burst into tears and fled the room. LaCroix's voice sounded behind her. "And you will not leave this house until further notice without my permission."

LaCroix sat for some time in his chair, drinking with unaccustomed heaviness. Certainly Alexandra's defiance had surprised him, but what sent him repeatedly to the decanter was the thought of Cat, magnificent, infuriating, indomitable Cat, as Alexandra's creature. The idea blinded him with rage, although it had been his own.

He tried in vain to block the picture from his thoughts, draining his goblet yet again. Instead the blood-wine mixture brought her image more forcefully before him.

His hunger woke. No, it was more than hunger. LaCroix shut his eyes, fighting his desire. Cat would make a splendid companion to share the glories of night and music, of arts ancient and new, to tread the measure with him through the intricate patterns of eternity.

But that would mean abandoning his revenge. Swearing, LaCroix hurled his glass into the fireplace and went out.

* * *

From her special seat at one end of the bar, Janette surveyed the entrance to the Raven. LaCroix was coming; she had sensed him the instant he began to move toward the Haight and its plethora of clubs. She always knew when he was moving toward her. Usually the warning was to her advantage, because she knew what he was up to in time to take evasive action if it threatened her. Strange that Nicolas (as always she thought the name in its French form, "Nee-co-lah") had lost that sense long before his final struggle and escape. Janette had sometimes wondered if it had not been so much a triumph for Nicolas as something done by LaCroix for his own dark ends.

Yes, he was coming toward her across the dance floor, his hair an ice-silver flame in the club's specialized lights. As always he sneered at the patrons without actually moving a muscle in his face. Janette's best reason for staying in the nightclub business after winning the original Raven on a bet in 1920's Paris had been LaCroix's aversion to such places.

"Good evening, Janette," he said urbanely. "Such calm at my return! I could almost think you weren't glad to see me."

Janette took a deep pull at her drink. "I never excite myself for certainties," she told him. The bartender automatically brought her a refill and at her gesture included her visitor. One of the bouncers, detecting perhaps the strain in her posture, moved toward them. LaCroix turned an inquiring glance on him, and the muscleman quickly decided to investigate the opposite side of the room.

"Congratulations, my dear," he said. "You have them well trained."

"Experience has its uses. Just tell me what you want."

"Quite the abrupt little businesswoman, aren't we?" He took a step closer, until he was brushing her side. "Very well then, so much for the amenities. Is the President of the Opera Association still among your coterie?"

"I suppose it'd be a waste of time to ask why? Yes, he is."

"How convenient!" LaCroix raised his glance in a half-toast. "He's going to get me two front row center seats for opening night. They're probably his, anyway."

Janette stiffened. "LaCroix, please, don't make trouble, I implore you!"

"Of course not! In fact, I promised not to kill him." His smile seemed to hold genuine amusement.

She was startled out of her sang-froid. "Promised not to— what do you mean? No, don't answer that here. I think you'd better come upstairs."

It was several hours deeper into the night when Janette returned from seeing the prominent attorney who happened to be the current president of the San Francisco Opera Association safely to his car. "It's a good thing he's already divorced!" she observed. "I only hope he's speaking to me after this."

LaCroix cocked an eyebrow at her. "Considering that his memory of tonight involves an assignation out of his wildest fantasies, I'm sure he will be."

"LaCroix, you didn't!" Janette snatched up a decanter and poured a glass of her private stock. "Oh, well, if he becomes too troublesome I can always erase all his memory."

"That would be inadvisable. I may have other uses for him in the future." LaCroix took a glass for himself.

"But why? What do you want with opening night tickets, and those tickets in particular?" Janette's brow was ever so slightly wrinkled.

"Because I've a fancy to see a certain dress again," he said sardonically.

Janette stared at him. "On a certain wearer, no doubt?"

"Oh, definitely. She thinks she's set me an impossible condition, the vixen. I want to see her eyes when she sees I've done it." The corners of the older vampire's mouth quivered with suppressed laughter.

"And these are different from all other mortal eyes?" Janette asked, trying to sound bored.

"Let's just say I haven't seen their like in quite a number of centuries." LaCroix shifted in his chair. "I'm too old a fox for that trap."

"No male is ever too old," she told him flatly. "Are you thinking of bringing her over, whoever she is?"

He rose and began to pace. "I don't know; perhaps. Yes, perhaps."

Janette finished the last of her drink. "And will I have the honor of meeting her?"

LaCroix ignored the sarcasm. "Oh, undoubtedly, whatever I decide. Yes, you will most definitely meet her." The knife-edge grin he gave her chilled even Janette.

Part 5

It began to seem to Cat as though permanent clouds had set in over San Francisco, a condition that had nothing to do with the real weather. The ads and posters for Musica Renata's next performance were out. She couldn't help feeling at least a twinge of regret at every one she saw. Greg found out her newly unlisted number and resumed making late night calls. Since the alto who had been spying for him happened to be a computer wizard, Cat suspected that Pacific Bell's systems had been hacked. A second number change would be useless. Instead she blocked Greg's home and office numbers, and the alto's, but there was nothing she could do about pay phones or Greg's friends.

The semester began at Berkeley. If anything, it was worse than Cat had expected. Budget cuts landed her with two inconveniently scheduled classes, and both of them seemed to have enrolled all the immature, untalented freshmen in the university. The research project she had wanted to be involved with wasn't available— too many interested younger faculty with more seniority than Cat— and Cat thought any bonehead should be able to see that the project for which she finally settled hadn't a quark's chance of succeeding.

* * *

The foyer of the War Memorial Opera house was gridlocked with first nighters stopping to check seat numbers or simply to be noticed. Cat stopped for the fourth time in their progress toward the doors into the auditorium. Half a step behind her, LaCroix said something under his breath, and took Cat's arm.

The crowd melted out of their way. Cat smiled to herself. He had turned on the vampire mind control. Of course he thought she needed to be drawn along beside him, lest she succumb to the broadcast command.

She looked up at him, considering. His evening clothes were exactly like those of the men around him, yet... "He makes the rest of them look like peasants!" thought Cat, surprised to find herself exultant.

Janette leaned over the dress circle railing. Yes, LaCroix was in the middle of the front row, beside a woman who wore her red gown like a coronation robe and her dark gold hair like a crown. Something stirred in Janette's memory. Frowning slightly, she focused her vampire hearing.

"Then you're admitting defeat?" LaCroix asked. Janette could hear his smile even if she couldn't see it.

The unknown's voice was definitely familiar. "If sitting here for opening night, and being lent a Cellini pendant to do it in, is defeat, then I don't want to win."

Cellini pendant. LaCroix's sphinx? Neither Janette nor Nick had ever been permitted to wear that! The sphinx was the monster Oedipus had destroyed to win his kingdom. When a coat of arms became necessary to claim nobility, LaCroix had chosen a sphinx surrounded by flames against a field of black.

"Janette?" her escort asked.

She turned to him, smiling. Dr. Bassingthwaite was the director of the Lowie Museum at Berkeley, and one of the few humans Janette had ever suspected of deducing her vampire identity without planning to stake her. Being regarded as an anthropological curiosity was intriguing. "I'm sorry," she said. "I thought I recognized someone from a long time ago."

* * *

Intermission found Janette at the top of the staircase. She looked out over the marble foyer that was one of the War Memorial Opera House's antique glories. Antique! Her mouth twisted at the thought. World War I was a little more than a century in the past. For a moment she thought of Nicholas, as always in the French pronunciation. Once she would have been happy that he was not among the San Francisco dead to whom the building was a monument. He had gone straight from the 1916 debacle with the acupuncturist in Chinatown to wangle his way into British intelligence in France. There he had done his best to be killed. Janette shuddered at the memory of some of the situations she and LaCroix had pulled him out of.

The glittering crowd flowed out from the orchestra seats into the lobby. LaCroix and his companion stopped just inside the main doors. Janette smiled to herself. It had been raining earlier; LaCroix had a catlike aversion to damp. LaCroix's companion turned to say something to him, and for the first time her face was directly in Janette's line of vision.

Janette removed her hand from the balustrade just in time to keep it from splintering in her grasp. She swept up her skirt, said, "I'm sorry, there's someone I must talk to," to her escort, and hurried toward LaCroix and his prey.

"Where are we going?" Dr. Bassingthwaite asked, trailing her through the crowd. It was one of his nicest traits, Janette thought fleetingly, that he never argued with her.

"To a rescue!" she told him. The crowd parted before her.

Wonderful! thought Cat. Here came the cavalry just as she reached an understanding with the Indians.

LaCroix laughed. "Good evening, Janette," he said, opening the game. "I thought we might see you here."

"Indeed?" rejoined Janette. "You must expect to see so many people!"

"Must I? I can't think of any." LaCroix adjusted a cufflink which was not out of place.

Janette threw him an incandescent smile. "I can. Roland d'Agincourt, for instance, or Sharibet. Especially dear Sharibet! I hear she's as imperious as ever, when her orders are flouted. She regards them as law, you know."

Cat was impressed. Among other things, she was not supposed to know that her cousin Roland was a vampire, or that Sharibet, generally described as the Empress of Vampires, had forbidden anyone to take revenge on her father, either himself or through her mother and their children. Janette must be desperate to mention Sharibet in public.

LaCroix's smile equalled Janette's for sincerity. Cat was reminded of an amiable shark. "Of course she does," he said. "They *are* like laws; they even have loopholes."

"Which you've found?" Janette asked sarcastically.

"Oh, yes." LaCroix was actually grinning.

"It's no use claiming you didn't know her," Janette began, carefully not looking at Cat.

Cat decided it was time to intervene. "Actually, I'm not sure we all know each other," she told the combatants, in feigned ignorance of the situation. She held out her hand to Janette. "I'm Cat Knight."

"How remiss of me," LaCroix said. "Janette, aren't you going to present your friend?"

Janette distractedly made the necessary introductions. Cat began chatting with Dr. Bassingthwaite about the Lowie's controversial new Early People in the Americas exhibit. Snatches of the vampire conversation floated under theirs.

"You know perfectly well who she..."

"Of course. Why else..."

"I'm warning you, I won't let you..."

"My dear Janette, bringing her across was your idea..."

"My idea! LaCroix—"

Just then the warning bell rang. Vampires and mortals returned obediently to their seats.

Salieri's *Armida* proceeded on stage with less than Cat's full attention.

"Bringing her across was your idea." The overheard phrase echoed in her head. Bringing her across. Cat had assumed that LaCroix planned to kill her. Her father would know exactly what to make of a victim drained of blood, whatever San Francisco Homicide might say about cults and maniacs. No doubt LaCroix had other plans for afterward, but she had been certain her place in them would only begin with her death.

Of what use could she possibly be to him as an unwilling vampire? LaCroix struggled with her father for centuries. Certainly he could embitter the rest of her parents' lives with the knowledge that Cat was now trapped, but neither would live long enough, in vampire terms, to make the game worthwhile to him. Unless—

Did he think he could force her father to come back across, as a ransom for the rest of her family? She would never allow that to happen! "So you want an unwilling victim, LaCroix?" thought Cat, surprising herself. "You've going to find this one willing. Let's see you use that for blackmail."

* * *

Cat flicked on the light switch in her living room, and took the key out of the lock. She was singing a tune from the opera's finale. The music ended in a choked scream which Salieri had never composed. Someone was sitting in her armchair.

"So he finally brought you home," observed Janette. "I was beginning to think I should have waited at his house."

Cat stormed across to her. "What in Hell are you doing here?"

"Trying to keep you out of Hell, actually," Janette said. "Nick used to think it was cute when your mother got angry and swore, but he never approved of it in other women. Does he rebuke you?"

"Dad doesn't usually make me that angry. Janette, please, stop trying to pretend you're my aunt."

"Actually, cherie, I feel exactly like an aunt, and it's really quite depressing." Janette took one of Cat's hands. "Kitty-Cat, don't you know who he is?"

"Of course I know! I admit I was surprised when he didn't give me an alias." Cat grinned. Janette, suddenly stricken by her likeness to Nicholas, was unable to answer. Cat dropped into the desk chair, next to her visitor. "He probably thought I wouldn't know who and what he was. Janette, I've been meaning to ask you something, only I couldn't think of an excuse that wouldn't make you suspicious. He seems to be able to use mind-control without looking into the target's eyes. I thought that was impossible!"

"It is— for most of us. Sharibet probably taught him. She's the oldest and most powerful of us." Janette's head came up sharply. "Cat, has he been using it on you?"

"He tried. I didn't tell him it won't work. Don't you remember?"

"*I* can't hypnotize you. What LaCroix can do, I wouldn't like to say."

Cat smiled at her. "I'm forgetting my manners! I don't have anything like your private stock, of course, but I can offer you wine."

"Yes, please." Janette followed her toward the kitchenette in the corner. "Cat, are you sure it didn't work?"

"Well, there aren't any gaps in my memory, and I'm apparently still mortal." Cat handed her a glass and poured one for herself. "I just flattered him by letting him think I'd come over to talk to him because he was trying to coerce me. He's so transparent, you know. He thinks I don't know what he is, so he doesn't suspect that I know what he wants."

Janette's sip was unnecessarily large. "Transparent? I beg you, don't underestimate him. LaCroix's a master game-player, but once he's finished he enjoys crushing the pieces! I don't even want to think about what he'd do if he knew you were playing games of your own."

Cat's smile softened. "I do. He'd move the stakes higher, to prove there's nothing he can't control. Do you know why I was at the opera with him tonight? Because I bet him that he couldn't get the front row center seats."

"That was a sure thing. He knew the Opera Association president is a friend of mine." There was a faint hesitancy on the word *friend*.

"So that's it," said Cat. "I thought he was going to murder the ticket holders."

Janette stared at her, disbelieving. "You can't tell me you didn't care?"

"Of course I cared, but all I had to do was add to the challenge. I specified that he couldn't kill anyone to get the tickets."

Janette nodded with reluctant agreement. "Well, yes, he did say that. Cat, please, just because he enjoys fencing with you now doesn't mean he won't kill you when he's finished."

"Or bring me across." Cat finished her glass. "You know, I've been thinking about that ever since intermission. I'm not sure I'm opposed to the idea."

Janette fell abruptly back into the armchair. "It would break Nee-co-lah's heart!"

"I know. Don't worry; I won't let him bring me across. It's just that, when he touches me—"

Janette's voice rose. "When he *what*? Cat, he is hypnotizing you! He must be!"

"You sound like an aunt again! Of course he touches me. He's teaching me to play the lyre. I used that to get close to him. I didn't want to have to worry about him following me around all the time, so I arranged to see him regularly in the same place." Cat put her glass down on the desk. "Janette?"

The vampire was shaking with laughter. "If I ever had any doubts about your paternity, I don't any more! You couldn't have inherited that kind of insanity from anyone but Nick. Will you promise me something?"

"Maybe. What is it?"

"If you get into trouble with this, come to me."

Cat looked at her for a moment. "Only if you promise not to call my parents when you get home, or Roland, either. I'll know if you do, because I don't believe in coincidences, and I will go straight to LaCroix and tell him everything."

She spoke quietly, but Janette had lived with that tone for nearly eight centuries. Cat was like her father; she would do exactly as she said.

"Very well, I promise. But, Cat, please, promise you'll come to me if you get in over your head?"

"I will. Janette, give me credit for common sense, or at least for caring about my father. Do you really think I'd want to hurt him, or my mother?"

"I don't think you'd want to, no," Janette said, "but what people want doesn't count for much where LaCroix's concerned."

Cat sat staring into space for a long time after Janette had left. Then the mail light on her desk computer went on, and she dialed up her account. A burst of language which would definitely not have met her father's standards flew out of her mouth. She slammed down the DELETE key. She had forgotten to block Greg's access to her email. She began to type the instructions.

A bit of her conversation with Janette returned to her. She thought of LaCroix and a grin formed across her lips. "All I have to do is make it a challenge..."

Clearing the screen, she moved out of mail. A few lines were enough to write the program she needed. It took the better part of an hour before she was satisfied with the letter which her mailer would dispatch to Roland and Kim's address in France if she failed to countermand the instructions at the proper times.

Part 6

Alexandra crouched in the shadows at the top of the stairs. If LaCroix had looked up before he left, he would have seen her, but he never noticed anything any more, not when he was going somewhere with *her.* Alexandra could no longer contemplate her rival except generically by the pronoun. The thought of Cat's name was like a cross against her bare flesh.

LaCroix had been wearing a suit instead of evening clothes. He wasn't taking *her* to the opera again. He'd already done that this week, anyway. Alexandra frowned. Nothing else took as long as the opera. She would have to fly if she were to carry out her plan, and Alexandra was terrified of heights. This was yet one more wrong to lay at *her* door!

The lock snapped on as LaCroix closed the front door behind him. Alexandra listened, straining, until she could hear nothing but the usual night noises from the street. Then she moved across the landing, through the drawing room, and onto the porch which gave onto the backyard. Closing her eyes, she pulled herself onto the railing and forced herself with shaking hands to take off into the air.

* * *

As Cat unlocked her front door, later that night, her ACT program slid out from under her arm. LaCroix swept her an elegant bow and picked it up for her. Cat grinned at him. The American Conservatory Theatre's current production happened to be a wildly extravagant Restoration comedy. She had been watching LaCroix's manner regress to the seventeenth century since the first intermission. On a whim she held out her hand, with the wrist curved and the back up. Just as impulsively, LaCroix took the hand and kissed it.

For a moment both froze, wondering for separate reasons, "Have I betrayed myself?" Covering her confusion, she took a step backward. Cat's foot came down on something slippery just inside her living room threshold. She almost fell.

LaCroix caught her. He stood holding her, a moment longer than necessary. Cat looked down at her feet, frowning at the piece of slick paper which hadn't been there when she left. She bent quickly and picked it up.

"Cat, what is it?" he asked as she drew in her breath. She shook her head, and sank into the nearest chair. Following her, LaCroix took the flyer for Cat's last Musica Renata performance out of her hand. One figure had been burned out of the group photo. LaCroix frowned. "Young Greg definitely wants sorting out."

Cat made a pushing-away gesture. "No, don't bother. I'm only going to spend one more semester at Berkeley. I'll just have to watch out for him." She smiled. "Besides, if he doesn't get a reaction he'll be too busy looking over his shoulder to do anything else for a while."

LaCroix found himself absurdly touched by that smile. His vampire senses could smell the tears Cat was holding back. He fought to keep his eyes from turning golden. The flyer was Greg's death warrant; he wasn't worth one of those tears.

LaCroix's fist clenched. Never mind what Greg wasn't worth. He, LaCroix, would *not* have his hunt interrupted again! That was all that mattered.

Cat's irrational sense of responsibility for the young swine would make her try to bargain him out of it, if she knew what LaCroix was planning. He reached down and cupped her chin in his cold hand. "Cat," he said, compellingly.

She looked up into his eyes. LaCroix focused all his strength at projective hypnotism on her.

Cat shook his hand away, suddenly tired of hide-and-seek. She had had enough of being a pawn labelled "Nick's daughter."

"It's no use," she told him. "I'm like my mother; vampire mind control doesn't work on me. I've known who you are, and why you're stalking me, all along. In fact, I've been stalking you back."

For the first time in more than two thousand years, LaCroix was at a loss. "Stalking me back?" he asked with his quietest urbanity.

"Yes, stalking," said Cat. "You offered to teach me the lyre, but I'd have found something else to let me keep an eye on you, if you hadn't. I don't know why you went after me when you're really after Aurie, but if you think I'm going to provide you with cover for attacking my little sister, or just for revenge on my father, or even if you just think I'm easier prey, you can think again-- several times!"

Gold shone momentarily in the vampire's eyes. How dare a presumptuous, powerless, mortal woman plot to thwart him! Then he caught the ghost of fear choked under a draft of anger which he could feel her struggling to fan. The gold disappeared. He wanted, suddenly, to put his arms around her. LaCroix began to laugh. "Cat's the wrong name for you; what you are is a tigress! Very well, my Tigress, if you know what I am, what's to prevent me from taking you here and now? And why haven't I done it before?"

Stay calm, Cat exhorted herself. The laughter must be a trick. *His Tigress? Don't be a fool, Cat Knight; you're not his anything.*

Aloud, she answered, "At first I thought it was because you enjoyed teaching me. Then maybe because you'd have to give up winning the bet." She managed to smile straight into his eyes. "Now I know it's because if anything happens to me, and that includes disappearing, there's a letter to Roland which contains a complete account for Sharibet."

"In the hands of the traditional third party," LaCroix replied, after the faintest pause. "It wouldn't be Janette, of course."

"Of course not. You'd have it away from her in two minutes. No, it's somewhere safe, and if I don't countermand my instructions at the times I arranged, Sharibet will know all about your plans to take revenge on my father through me."

"My dear Cat, Roland is much more likely to come galumphing over to San Francisco to tear me limb from limb." LaCroix made no attempt to hide his amusement— or his admiration for her boldness.

Cat shook her head impatiently. "Yes, I know. And knowing Roland, he'll forget that he'll have to tear your head off to prevent you from resurrecting. He's sweet, but he's not very bright when he's angry. The letter's addressed to Kim, too. She will notify Sharibet, because she won't want you to kill Roland." Cat came to her feet and held out her hands to him. "LaCroix, that letter doesn't have to go anywhere. I don't want to stop taking my lyre lessons. They're the only time I've been happy lately, that and the opera and the play tonight. Can't we just be friends?"

The same unreadable expression crossed his face that she had seen at the reception after her last Musica Renata concert. Behind it LaCroix felt the weight of his twenty-three hundred years. Only once had anyone... He shied almost physically from the memory of Arsinoe.

"Friends? Perhaps, Tigress, perhaps."

Cat had seen a shadow pass at the back of his eyes. She could have sworn it was pain. Suddenly Cat was blazingly curious about the man LaCroix had been. LaCroix! Why, she realized, that can't even be his name. He's older than Janette. He's probably older than Christianity.

Cat had a habit of sitting in her window seat to think; now automatically she walked over to it and sat down, curling up in one corner. "LaCroix?" she asked.

He had followed her. "Yes?"

"Will you tell me truth about something?"

"I might."

"Who are you, really, and how did you become a vampire?"

He looked away. For perhaps a minute, Cat thought he wasn't going to respond.

Centuries of caution warred with impulse. Never before had he allowed a mortal to know who and what he was, and live. Never before had anyone, mortal or vampire, wanted to know his past. Arsinoe had been content with bits and pieces when something triggered a confidence.

He might have known Nick's get would be nothing but trouble. "Who am I, really?" he repeated in a savage parody of her tone. "This!" His eyes flared golden as he snarled the last word past his fangs.

Cat sat very still. "No. That's what you are. I've always known you're a vampire. I asked *who* you are."

"LaCroix will do." He hadn't thought about his mortal name since before she was born. What kind of witchcraft was she using on him that he wanted to hear it on her lips?

Witchcraft. Arsinoe used to threaten to cast a spell on him. It had been their most private joke; he had rescued her after her former master had beaten her for witchcraft.

Cat seemed to read his thoughts. "I'm not planning to use a name spell on you," she said with quiet humor. "What's your real name?"

He said, "Menelaos," before he knew that he was going to answer her. Only Sharibet had ever bent him to her will like that. How dared Cat sit serenely on her cushion, with no trace of fear in her eyes or in her heartbeat!

It was a mistake to think about Cat's heartbeat. He suddenly scented her blood, flowing warm in the hollow of her throat.

"And how did you become a vampire?" Cat didn't know herself why she was insisting. Somehow it was of critical importance to make him say it.

It was like stripping the blood–melded tunic from a wound after one of his mortal battles. Pain, rage and desire sent him back to the vampire state. He growled, "I'm a vampire because I chose the wrong woman to rape!" There, now let her sit like a statue carved in ice.

"Sharibet." Cat nodded. "I'm sure she deserved it."

LaCroix was shocked back to the appearance of humanity. "What do you know about Sharibet?" he demanded.

"That she's the oldest and strongest vampire. Janette calls her the Empress. She came to Toronto when I was twelve, and she made Janette bring me to see her. I don't know why me, and not Jeffrey or Aurie or Richard. That's when I found out a lot of things. I'm pretty sure Janette thought she was going to bring me across, because she was almost hysterical with relief when she was allowed to take me back again. She babbled a lot of things she shouldn't have while she was driving me home." Cat smiled at him. "Why did you pick Sharibet to rape?"

Now he was sure she didn't understand. Arsinoe had died because she hadn't understood why he had so vehemently not, in the abstract, wanted children. Nightmares imprisoned for two millennia rose in his memory. He'd woken sweat-drenched again and again, trying to reach her before she found Elora.

What Cat didn't know might harm her. As though he confronted a physical enemy in Cat's defense, he began to tell her about Menelaos of Pergamon.

The fog had gathered and begun to clear before the tale drew to its close. He paced around the room. Finally he stopped in front of her. He had left out nothing, not even the twenty years spent waiting for Cat, Nick's favorite child, to grow old enough to serve LaCroix's revenge. "Do you understand? I was going to let Alexandra enslave you, make you like a wild beast until your father chose either to destroy you himself, or to beg me to take you over because I control Alexandra."

He stood as if under court-martial, expressionless at attention. She would hate him now. Let her hate him. She was not going to see him care.

Cat was watching him through a mist of tears. He hadn't looked at her once while he was speaking. He hadn't seen the three times she reached toward him. It was as though he was determined to make her believe in the monster everyone else saw.

"Menelaos," whispered Cat, and held out her arms to him.

He seized her convulsively, like a man snatched from drowning, and their lips met in a kiss which was almost violent.

A noise outside snapped them apart. Something pale flashed away from the window.

Cat laughed. "Mai Tai strikes again! It's only the Siamese from downstairs. He's always coming in my window; he knows a soft touch when he sees one."

LaCroix shook his head. There had been something in the branches of the tree that grew close to the sill, but his senses had been too full of her to register more than that.

She started to move back into arms. He stepped away from her. "Better not, Tigress. There's a difference between courage and foolhardiness."

"I don't think I'd mind being brought across, if it was you," she told him.

"You must remember to tell Sharibet that." LaCroix smiled at her.

"Would it stop her from punishing you?" Cat asked. "I could tell her I wanted to be a vampire."

LaCroix took her hands in his. "It might make her a little less inventive."

Cat sat down again on the window seat. "When I was a little girl, I used to shock Janette by telling her I wanted to be a vampire when I grew up. I did, too, although she wouldn't believe it. I'd forgotten about that, until I met you."

"And I've made you want to come across?" LaCroix's voice was skeptical. He sat beside her, still holding her hands.

"Well, yes, you have. There's so much I'm tired of, and so much—" Cat shook her head. "Never mind. Janette's right. It would break Dad's heart."

"And not your mother's?"

Cat frowned a little. "You know, I'm not sure. If she knew I'd thought it out, and if I promised to come to her if I regretted it, I don't think she'd like it, but I don't think she'd try to stop me, either. But that's only if Dad weren't involved. She's very protective of him."

"You don't have to tell me that," he said."

"If I asked you to bring me across, would you do it?" Cat looked at him with a considering expression.

He was silent for a moment. Then, "I don't know. I might. But you'd have to be sure."

"I am sure! I just don't want Dad to be hurt." Cat frowned. Then her eyes widened. "You're immortal," she said slowly.

"Yes, but—"

Cat was squeezing his hands in her excitement. "I know this sounds callous, and I do love my father, but he's not young any more, and— Will you wait for me? Even if it's ten or fifteen years?"

"Behold the fruits of mortality! Poor Nicholas. Yes, Cat, I will." LaCroix had brought her hands together between his, and was holding them against his chest.

"Then we'll have to be careful."

"We will be. I promise you, Tigress." Cat caught her breath at the intensity in his voice. He smiled at her again. "Just be careful how low you wear your necklines at your lessons."

"Lessons— look at the time! And I've got an eight o'clock class to teach!"

* * *

The fog had formed again by morning and thickened. Actually, it was nearly an hour before the sun reached the bottom edge of the horizon. Cat supposed, making her way toward the BART station, that the time could be called "morning" only by courtesy. Her day was beginning, anyway. She smiled sleepily at the thought of calling LaCroix when she arrived at her office. Why should he have all the fun of staying up all the night, and none of the consequences?

She was so wrapped up in picturing his reaction to being roused at this hour by a prank call that she never sensed the figure that moved out of the alleyway next to the house, following her.

The follower hung back as Cat reached the corner and stepped down into the station. Alexandra's fair hair shone as she trailed Cat down the stairs.

As usual on the early morning runs, the approaching train was old stock, racketing along at a much higher speed than its designers had envisioned.

Alexandra snarled triumphantly. *Now let LaCroix bring* her *home*! The memory of LaCroix and Cat in each other's arms, seen last night through Cat's window flashed before her. *Let LaCroix make love to* her *now!*

Cat never heard Alexandra's snarl. The white tile walls and bright posters spiralled as she fought for balance.

She fell directly onto the tracks, into the headlights of the train.

Part 7

Janette snapped her fingers impatiently as she waited outside Customs and Immigration at San Francisco International Airport. What could be keeping them? Had somebody in Immigration finally detected Nick's passport as a forgery? No, that was absurd. Larry Merlin had tricked the proper computer years ago into issuing a perfectly genuine renewal for nonexistent originals.

Maybe she would have a few moments alone with Nick. Her jealousy of Nat had lessened as she watched the mortal woman age, but Janette would never forget that Nick had been hers before Nat's ancestors had a permanent surname.

Nick came through the doorway first. The dark gold hair had silver wings in it now, and had receded just enough to sharpen the widow's peak, but his eyes were the same deep-sea blue that had caught and held her heart eight centuries ago. Janette whispered "Nee-co-lah," in the pronunciation that only she used and hurried toward him.

Nat appeared at Nick's side before Janette could reach him. The lines in her face registered on Janette as Nick's never did. Nat had passed sixty. It wasn't fair for her to show so little gray, or that the tortoiseshell glasses she wore now should be becoming. Janette didn't exactly want Nee-co-lah to be unhappy in his marriage, but she did sometimes hope he felt regret.

He had spotted her. "Janette! Cat isn't ...."

"Of course not!" Janette hugged him around the carry-on he was holding. "I promised I would meet you," she added as Nat joined then. "Besides, the time of day doesn't matter. All I have to do is drive from inside my garage to the underground garages here. It's amazing what you can do these days if you have a medical permit for tinted windows."

* * *

The freeway was flying past before she broke the silence inside the car. "Nee-co-la, there's something you and Nat have to know."

This time it was Nat whose fears responded. "Cat is dead?"

Janette tossed her head. "Oh, do try to be sensible. No, Cat's not dead! Why would I pick a moving car to break news like that?"

"There's worse news?" asked Nat harshly.

Janette said, "You'd probably say so. LaCroix's at the hospital, and it's not what you think!"

She looked thoughtfully at the dark-shaded landscape outside the windshield.

"I didn't know LaCroix had come into the Raven several hours before sunrise...."

* * *

Janette didn't know how long he'd been drinking when she passed through the bar and saw him. He seemed almost disoriented. If he were mortal she'd have said he'd been in a fight, although of course there weren't any scars. He didn't even notice her; he called out to Tony and demanded a double brandy.

Janette had to go over to him. She was afraid not to. Nick had never seen LaCroix drunk, and Janette had only seen it once. It was not an experience she cared to repeat.

"Since when do you drink at the bar?" Janette asked him. "I'm about to go upstairs for the day."

He looked at her with something that was trying to be one of his sneers, and not quite making it. "Ah, yes, that's what you are. I told her that's what I am."

"Cat?"

"She did tell you the whole thing, then. Good. I should have known. Nothing stops Cat, not even rape."

* * *

Natalie gasped and Nick roared, "What!?" followed by a string of curses which he hadn't used since they'd landed him in one of the Paris Temple's penance cells.

Janette knifed into a lane change that took no account of everyone else's mortality. "That was more or less what I said. In Latin. He'd scared all the languages I've learned out of me."

* * *

LaCroix laughed. "Not Cat, you fool! She'd have seen through that in a moment. Tell that idiot bartender of yours to bring me the rest of the bottle."

"I've got a better vintage upstairs in my liquor cabinet," Janette said. "From my private stock. How long has it been since you fed?"

"Think I'm drunk, do you?" He grinned at her. Pleasantly! "I am. I'm higher than that ridiculous moon shuttle that keeps going off-course. Cat's like champagne."

Janette froze. "LaCroix, you don't mean Cat's blood –"

"You never have trusted me. Cat does. She always has. Even when she didn't know it."

"Please, LaCroix, you're not making sense." Actually, Janette wasn't sure she wanted to hear anything about this that was intelligible.

He turned professorial. "You've failed your first lesson with Cat. She never makes sense. She's too busy stalking me."

Janette wondered whether all her bouncers together could get him upstairs. "LaCroix, in plain language, have you brought Cat over, or bitten her?"

"Maybe she's bitten me," he said. "She's done something. Don't be a fool, Janette. Cat's still mortal."

Janette thought she saw a way to get him out of the bar. She spoke in Latin. "You haven't brought her over, she knows what you are, and you're talking about it in a room full of our kind. Are you trying to call the Enforcers down on her?"

It worked. He came upstairs with her. Janette had to stop en route to chase Alma away from a mortal who should never have left the farm.

LaCroix sat down on her sofa with a snifter of her Napoleon brandy, laced as heavily as Janette dared with blood. "Poor Janette! Even immortality can't solve the servant problem. Oh, that reminds me. I came to ask if you could take Alexandra off my hands."

Janette's jaw dropped. Never, in the entire two thousand years she'd known LaCroix, had he ever *asked* her to do anything. Ordered, yes, but asked?

"Now I know you're drunk," she said. "Alexandra's been dead for twenty years."

"The reports of her death were greatly exaggerated. She found a hole to hide in when you and Nick pushed her into the sun, then came crawling back to me. That wasn't very nice of you and Nick, by the way, but I'm sure you had your reasons."

"We did," Janette told him. "She was trying to kill Cat."

LaCroix sobered at that. "I see. No doubt it seemed a trivial matter at the time?"

Janette told him the whole story. The sun was rising as she finished.

She had just closed the blinds when LaCroix cried out. "*No!* Tigress, look behind you!" Janette thought he had gone mad. His eyes blazed gold. He lashed out; the sofa flew over backwards and crashed against the opposite wall.

When the police interviewed her at the hospital, Janette learned that this was the exact moment when Alexandra pushed Cat in front of the train.

Apparently he was watching through Alexandra's eyes as the paramedics came, put Cat on a respirator, and transferred her to an ambulance. When Alexandra's vampire hearing caught the name of the hospital from the radio transmissions, LaCroix insisted on going to Cat at once.

* * *

Nick shot a sideways glance at Janette, then quickly looked away. "And you didn't look for Alexandra."

Janette longed to slap him. No longer envious of Natalie, she wanted instead to commiserate with her on being stuck with Nick for three decades. "No, I didn't! I'm not a clairvoyant, in case you'd forgotten. And if you think I could have controlled LaCroix, you're getting senile early even for a mortal!"

* * *

Dr. Chang was silently thankful. The police had taken the Knight case as an attack against one of their own, which in a sense it had been. The father was head of the Homicide Bureau in Toronto-- Dr. Chang couldn't remember the formal title — but no one had told her that the mother was a pathologist and former coroner. That didn't mean they wouldn't go to pieces, but it did lessen the odds.

The mother broke the silence. "Doctor, please don't try to keep things back. Nick's already talked to the officer in charge. Cat fell or was pushed in front of a train, which was slowing down or she'd have been run over and killed outright. She contacted some of the electrical equipment under the car. Because she was already lying across the tracks, she got a massive electric shock, a lot like the old-fashioned electric chair. Her heart stopped; if that crew of paramedics hadn't happened to be passing the entrance to the station when the call went out, she'd be dead. And that's without the skull fracture." Dr. Knight's voice was suddenly unsteady. "I've autopsied deceaseds who hadn't been through as much."

Captain Knight reached over and squeezed his wife's hand. "It's all right, Nat," he said softly. The phrase ought to have been meaningless, but his wife seemed to draw strength from it. To the trauma specialist he added, "Not even your chief of surgery wanted to tell us anything, and he was in med school with Nat."

"We just don't know," Dr. Chang answered. "She's got a compound skull fracture of the occiput, a subdural hematoma's trying to form, and so far no one's been able to make sense of whatever the electric charge did to her encephalogram."

"May I see her records?" Dr. Knight asked. Dr. Chang hesitated. Dr. Knight pushed back her hair, so automatically that it must be an habitual gesture. "Doctor, my job is finding out what's going to kill people, if it hasn't already. I went straight out of my residency to being a coroner. Whatever's on those scans isn't likely to be as bad as what I'll imagine if you don't let me see them."

Dr. Chang thought suddenly of her little girl. What if Jincy were the patient, and well-meaning staffers kept pushing her away as though she were a civilian? Dr. Chang turned the computer so that the screen faced toward them. "It's MEDTRAC," she said, naming the most common medical record program. "I hope you know it." She stood up, looking at Captain Knight rather than his wife. "I'm going to take you to see your daughter now, and I'm not going to look behind me. The way to IC is clearly posted."

For nearly five minutes Natalie scrolled through the charts, pausing to stare at the scanned images. Then she returned the computer to its original position. "I see," she said quietly. "You don't know." There was a faint stress on 'you'. Natalie sank into the chair with her face in her hands.

* * *

Nick stood at his daughter's bedside. The white bandage hid her hair (or had they shaved it? Nick winced at the thought), so that for a moment he was reminded of Natalie in her white lab cap before the children were born. He clenched his fists, fighting back tears. "Kitty-Cat," he whispered. "You always were just like your mother, sure you could take on the world. Just live, Kitty-Cat, please. Live."

Nat came softly in just as he spoke. The wife and the doctor struggled inside her as she tried to decide what to tell Nick.

He tried to smile. "What did you find out?"

Gallantry won the battle in favor of the wife. She hadn't seen him look like that since the shock of having Cat and Jeffrey kidnapped brought on her premature labor with Richard and Aurora.

"Nothing we didn't already know," Natalie lied.

Part 8

A nurse escorted them into one of the private waiting rooms. LaCroix was already there, at the window. He turned at the sound of the door.

Janette came in, with an old man. LaCroix frowned. She had gone to fetch Cat's parents from the airport. Had they brought some relative on Natalie's side with them? He could see a likeness to Cat.

Then Natalie followed them, and the truth hit LaCroix's heart like a stake. This was Nick, not the eternal young knight of his memory. His Nick was dead, entombed somehow in this old man with gray in his hair and the lines thirty years of mortality had etched into his face.

"Oh, Nicholas," thought the vampire, appalled, "was it worth this?"

The nurse said with professional cheeriness, "Your daughter's fiance has been so good!" None of them heard the rest. Nat was too busy disguising her grip on Nick's arm as a comforting gesture. Janette made eye contact and the woman removed herself.

"Fiance?" snarled Nick.

"Did you expect me to call on you and ask for her hand?" LaCroix's sarcasm had lost nothing over the years.

"Did you even ask Cat?"

"As a matter of fact," said LaCroix, with a secretive little smile, utterly unlike any of the expressions Nick remembered. "She asked me."

The nurse reappeared before Nick could twist out of Nat's hold. "Do any of you know someone called Menelaos?"

"I'm Menelaos." LaCroix was already moving toward her.

"Ms. Knight is restless and asking for you. Please come with me."

LaCroix followed the nurse out. Natalie gasped, "Menelaos? What the hell?" Nick made as though to follow.

Janette pressed him back into his chair. Her mouth was open. "It's his real name," she said. "At least, it's the one he was using when he... met me."

* * *

The days became indistinguishable from the nights. The window in the waiting room had its blinds down by day. Sometimes LaCroix sat there around the clock, determinedly affable. Nick began forgetting to bristle at him.

The police investigation went nowhere. Nick and Nat, interviewed separately, made the right responses to the questions, but neither knew anything about a tall, blonde woman who might have had a grudge against Cat. LaCroix held forth at great length about Greg. The unexpected result was that Greg and his alibi, the scheming alto, eloped to Vegas. Cat's friends reported them to be under the misimpression that wives couldn't testify against husbands. The alto happened to be a tall blonde and like Greg, her alibi was that they had been waking up hung-over in her apartment. LaCroix, hearing of the marriage, muttered something about cosmic justice.

Nick kept disappearing between night visiting hours until Janette, tired of Nat's excuses about stress, confronted him before he could vanish again. He glared at her. "Abandoning— Nat, you know where I've been!"

"She didn't ask me." Natalie said, bewildered.

Janette scowled. "And I know, too, of course. I've seen you, Tony's seen you, Alma's seen you!"

Nat turned to Nick with tears in her eyes. "Nick, you haven't been going to the Raven?"

"Nat!" he whispered. "How could you think—"

Janette stamped her foot. "Don't be a fool! He's been lurking outside the hospital. The only thing that surprises me is that he hasn't been mugged, or at least arrested. Nee-co-lah, you idiot, this isn't Toronto! You don't have a badge. You don't have powers."

"Someone has to watch out for Alexandra! LaCroix's obviously not going to."

"Natalie, how have you stood thirty years with this imbecile? Tony and Alma are out there for that. So was I, until I had to watch you instead. As for LaCroix, why do you think he's here all the time? Just suppose Alexandra gets into the hospital. There are ways to move about in daylight; you know that. None of us has a prayer of stopping her except him!"

"Stop her? She's his creature. What makes you think he didn't put her up to the attack?" Nick was shouting now.

"Because I was there when he knew what Alexandra had done," Janette snapped. "She thought at first that she'd killed Cat. He was ready to dive into the sun. I only stopped him by reminding him that suicide would prevent him from punishing her. Then she saw the paramedics come, and heard them say that Cat was alive. I saw him then, too. Nick, he—"

"He's going to discipline her properly as soon as she makes another attempt." LaCroix strode into the room. "Really, Nicholas, I see you haven't lost your taste for melodrama. A little more volume and I shall have to erase every memory in western North America. Natalie, take this mortal of yours away before he brings the Enforcers down on us."

* * *

Time contracted to the moments when Cat was conscious. Usually she recognized them, but she had less and less coordination. Finally after one session in which Cat hadn't been able to reach out to take her father's hand, Natalie herself broke down.

Nick held her close. "Nat, what is it you haven't been telling me?"

Startled, she looked up at him. "How did you know?"

"Because you've always been a terrible liar!" He twined one hand in her hair. "It's something you saw in the charts the first day, isn't it? Every time the doctors mention Cat's records, you draw away."

"Five years ago we had a case who had been in an accident like Cat's. He worked for Toronto Hydro and he fell two stories onto a live line at the Sky Dome." Nat fought for control.

"And he died." Nick tried to spare her.

"No. He lived. Completely paralyzed, blind, sometimes on a respirator, but he lived. With full, normal intelligence. Oh, Nick, if Cat--"

Nick took her back to Cat's apartment, where they were staying, and left Janette with her.

The wall clock in Cat's Intensive Care cubicle registered the last of the visiting hours. She lay still and remote in the bed. Nick, who hadn't been able to bring himself to leave for the night, stopped short in the doorway at the sight of his old enemy, his former master.

LaCroix was sitting on Cat's bed, holding her hands. "'What say the augurs? Plucking the entrails forth, they could not find a heart within the beast.' That really happened, Cat, when Julius Caesar was assassinated. I told Will Shakespeare about it, one night at the Mermaid Tavern. He thought I'd read it somewhere. I always thought I was like that beast; I was proud of not having a heart."

LaCroix gently released Cat's hands. "Why am I bothering? Can you even hear me? Cat, you heard me when I tried to control you—hear me now! Control you. As if anyone ever could, my Tigress."

The silver and pearl ring caught the light as LaCroix's fingers pressed against Cat's forehead. Nick recognized one of the techniques for boosting vampire hypnosis. "You asked me to wait for you, as long as your father was alive. I promised, but we never thought it would end like this. Please, Cat, you must hear me! Release me from my promise so that I can set you free."

LaCroix, honoring a promise to a mortal? Nick stepped closer to the bed. LaCroix must know he was there, with his vampire hearing, and he must not care. In eight hundred years, Nick had never heard him speak in the tone he was using now.

LaCroix lapsed suddenly into something that Nick thought was Greek, but of which he understood only the despair. "My Tigress, don't leave me," whispered LaCroix.

At first Nick couldn't identify what he felt. Then he realized it was pity. He laid a hand on his old nemesis's shoulder. "LaCroix, it's time we talked."

The private waiting area was in shadow. The computerized lighting system had shut down all but one security light. All visitors were supposed to be out of the hospital. Watching family were presumed to be trying to sleep in the chairs.

"Are you enjoying your gloat?" LaCroix growled.

This time Nick knew it for a front. "No, and I'm not gloating. LaCroix, why did Cat ask you to bring her across?"

"I don't know. She said she'd wanted to be a vampire when she was a little girl." He smiled. "It used to shock Janette. Oh, that's right. You don't know. She's like her mother. Vampires can't hypnotize her. She knew who I was and she was stalking me."

"But she couldn't have— What do you mean, she wanted to be a vampire? Cat doesn't know anything about that!"

"Didn't you hear me say that Cat can't be hypnotized?" He laid out the whole story. "Nick, If she doesn't come back, doesn't consent..."

"Then I will consent for her." Nick's voice was suddenly old.

LaCroix's eyebrows rose. "Consent. You? Am I no longer Satan incarnate?"

"You never were. Oh, you were evil, but the evil was in me, too. I consented to being brought across. Janette only led me to you. I was the one who chose. I was the one who enjoyed the hunt as much as either of you for those first centuries. And I was the one who thought I had the right to take Alexandra's life because she was only a barmaid in a time when that was another word for whore." Nick looked away for a moment, then back again.

LaCroix spoke with the ghost of his old irony. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"That it was you who brought Alexandra across? No. If I hadn't taken her as my prey, you wouldn't have found her like that to bring over."

"Nicholas, Nicholas! Thirty years as a mortal and you still haven't outgrown that habit of taking all the blame for yourself." LaCroix shook his head.

"Stop sounding like a schoolmaster," said Nick. "This time you don't have to talk the guilt onto your shoulders. I'm back across, remember?"

"As if I could forget. Oh, well, if you weren't, there'd be no Cat." LaCroix stood up. "Nick, did you mean that about consenting for her?"

"Yes. If she were simply going to die, I think I could bear it, with or without God's help."

"God's help?" asked LaCroix.

"I went back to the church when the children were born. I wanted them to have that. I suppose they'd call me a religious man, now. I'm a good parishioner, anyway. So's Nat."

LaCroix wanted to shake him. "No doubt there's rejoicing among the angels. Nicholas, why did you say that, about if she were simply going to die?"

Nick told him what Natalie had read in the charts. LaCroix's eyes went gold, then red. He rasped, "Then Alexandra isn't going to see another sundown!" as he reached for the window.

A scream tore apart the drugged quiet of the hospital night. Alarms blared, voices shouted codes wildly on the intercoms. The sound of running feet overrode everything else. LaCroix said, "They're going into Cat's room," and sprang for the door. Nick followed him down the corridor and around the corner, past the double doors into Intensive Care.

In the chaos they reached Cat's cubicle before being stopped by the crowd of staff. No one was moving; Nick had just time to recognize vampire mind control before he was caught in it.

Alexandra was by the window, with Cat's unconscious body across her shoulder. She scrambled onto the sill and fled into the night.

LaCroix gave one great roar like a wounded beast and launched himself after her.

Part 9

Alexandra had enveloped herself and Cat in the late night fog over San Francisco. The fog muffled and fragmented sound, defeated vampire vision as the water particles blurred the spectra. LaCroix was trapped in a broken kaleidoscope of senses. Directions ceased to exist. No trace of Alexandra or of Cat registered as he cast about for them.

Then, suddenly, like a red blur in the distance, he felt Alexandra, like a cry of triumph in the night. He steadied himself in his flight, until his mind reached and caught Alexandra's. Contact snapped in a flare of savage mirth. LaCroix reoriented himself, soaring toward his own house.

There was light behind the curtains of two upstairs windows: his room. LaCroix settled noiselessly on the upper porch. The knob gave at his touch. Hovering so that no footfall could warn his enemy, LaCroix crossed into the hall where the shadow of the stairs thickened the darkness.

Alexandra stood at the foot of the great, carved mahogany bed. She had lit the fire in the hearth. The flames were mirrored in her green-gold eyes.

Cat lay on top of the dark blue quilt. Alexandra had dressed her in the black silk of LaCroix's favorite dressing gown. The bandage was gone from her head. Her hair flowed like old gold from a refiner's furnace. Her eyes were closed, and not even LaCroix's sight could tell whether she was breathing.

Arms outflung triumphantly, Alexandra swaggered toward her prey. The movement failed to register in the ornate, late Renaissance, silver-backed mirror which LaCroix had hung as a joke over the mantel. LaCroix's fists clenched. Cat too was invisible in the glass.

So that had been the cause of Alexandra's exultation! LaCroix thought. She must have brought Cat over in the air.

Cat's eyes opened slowly. Alexandra crowed obscene laughter. "Do you know where you are, fine lady? LaCroix's bed. Just where he always wanted you!"

LaCroix's fists clenched, but he dared not move for Cat's sake.

"Why?" Cat asked hoarsely. "Couldn't you fill it?"

Outside in the darkness, LaCroix smiled. How like Cat to start her vampire life defying her master!

Alexandra screamed in rage and aimed a vicious slap at Cat's face.

LaCroix was at her back with his hands around her throat before Alexandra had the chance to detect his presence. "One move out of you, and I *will* tear your head off. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she gasped.

"Splendid. If you ever again lay a hand on Cat, I'll personally throw you into a fire." LaCroix propelled her to the desk chair. She cringed under his glare. "Now, Alexandra, we're going to come to an understanding. You've chosen to bring Cat across in defiance of my command. I'm sure you feel gloriously independent, but you've forgotten one detail. As usual. I'm still *your* master."

Alexandra hurled invective at him. Cat huddled muzzily against the headboard. Neither voice reached her as understandable speech. She was violently thirsty as she tried to rise. The effort cost more than her strength. Cat slid to the floor.

The adversaries instinctively looked toward her. Alexandra snatched the moment. She broke free of LaCroix's hold, overturning the desk, and smashed the chair against the wall before charging at LaCroix with a jagged remnant of one of the legs.

He stood calmly waiting. He was stronger and faster than Alexandra. All he had to do was to catch the makeshift stake as she thrust it at him.

Cat saw Alexandra throw herself at LaCroix. "No!" Cat cried, and grabbed her legs. The fire was in front of them. LaCroix had said he'd throw Alexandra into the fire.

LaCroix shouted, "Cat, don't!" as Cat's newfound vampire strength sent Alexandra straight into the flames.

He had barely time to release his tie to Alexandra. There was no one to cut hers to Cat. Alexandra's pain and terror exploded back up her link to Cat in the instant of eternity that it took to die. Cat screamed and collapsed.

LaCroix, who believed in nothing, found that he was praying to every deity of every society in which he'd ever moved. Cat hadn't understood about the master/convert link which now bound her to Alexandra. He'd heard of new converts, "rescued" seconds too late, being driven mad by the master's staking, trapped in agony which had no proper outlet and no end, until they sought death in the sun.

He would not leave his Tigress to face the consequences alone. LaCroix lifted Cat back onto the bed. As he did something snapped underfoot.

The paper knife from the desk glinted in the firelight. LaCroix had chosen its modern purpose to indulge his sense of irony; it was an obsidian sacrificial dagger from Altun Kinal. Only the tip of the handle had broken. The blade was still pristinely sharp. Sharibet's voice sounded in his memory. "Yes, there is just one way by which mastery can be taken over, but few have ever paid that price."

Cat moaned softly. LaCroix picked up the knife. With infinite gentleness, he took Cat in his arms. "I love you," he whispered, saying the words for the first time. Then he tore open his shirt and plunged the knife into his heart. Amid a haze of agony, he saw the dark blood well up. With the last of his strength, he drew Cat close and brought her mouth to the wound.

* * *

Janette said, "Nee-co-lah, let me break it! This is no time for legalities."

The front door opened silently before Nick could reply. A stench gushed out at them. Natalie blurted, "That's burnt flesh!"

They hurried up the stairs. Janette halted at the first door as though she had run into a glass wall. She gasped something in an unidentifiable language.

Cat and LaCroix lay unconscious in each other's arms. Blood stained Cat's lips and her cheek where her head rested against his shoulder. The firelight glinted on the dagger beside them, until the black obsidian was nearly as red as the blood.

Natalie cried, "Cat!" and ran to her. She added, "Nick, please, I can't lift her alone," as he followed her, sat down on the bed, and pulled Cat onto his lap. Natalie checked automatically for a pulse.

"You won't find one," Janette told her. "She's already across." She turned LaCroix onto his back. "Nee-co-lah, look!"

A savage red scar stood out over LaCroix's heart.

Nat looked puzzled. "But vampires don't scar, do they? I mean, Nick, you didn't."

"Heart's blood," said Nick. "He's given her his heart's blood."

Janette's brow wrinkled. "But that's just a legend, isn't it?"

"No." Nick spoke with the authority of his years of struggle. "It isn't."

"Will you two please talk so that a mere always-mortal can follow you?" Natalie asked.

"Alexandra must have brought Cat over. There's only one way LaCroix could have taken her back. The new master has to cut open his own heart for the blood." Janette made a little sound of protest, but Nick continued. "It's done so rarely that most vampires think it's a myth. Nat, do you remember the time Sidney got scared and climbed my chest, before I was back across?"

"Of course I do, that doberman was after him— Oh! Nick, I never even noticed! You yelled like any mortal."

"Because he had a paw full of very sharp claws dug in right over my heart. That's the one place that being a vampire doesn't change. The heart and the tissues over it can feel pain just like a mortal."

"Worse," said Janette with conviction. "You've been back too long, Nee-co-lah."

Cat groaned and tried to move. Nick swept her up. "Janette, you'll have to see to LaCroix. Come on, Nat, she's going to need you to clean her up." He installed Cat and Natalie in what must have been Alexandra's bedroom, since neither of the others had the dust covers off the furniture. Nick's lips crooked momentarily. It had been his room when he and LaCroix and Janette had lived together in San Francisco.

Natalie washed the blood off Cat's face and brushed her hair. She started to take one of Alexandra's nightgowns from the wardrobe.

"No," said Nick.

Natalie hesitated. "You're right. Not in anything of hers. Nick, I can't stand for Cat to be in that— in Alexandra's power."

"She isn't," Nick told her. "LaCroix took her away from Alexandra."

"But that's worse!" Natalie was fighting back tears. Nick put his arms around her.

"He's changed, Nat. I'd never have believed it, not until last night." He began to tell her about the scene at Cat's bedside.

Janette stood in the doorway. "Nee-co-lah, have you forgotten everything? Can't you see her color's coming back? Come on, out of here, quickly!"

"Why?" asked Nat, standing her ground.

"Because it means Cat's going to come to any minute, and when she does she's going to be hungry and disoriented. She'll go for any blood she can find, including ours." Nick pulled his wife after him.

"Then, Janette, will you stay with her?" Nat was reluctantly letting Nick lead her away.

Janette shook her head. "Nee-co-lah said any blood. Even our kind won't be safe with her until she's fed, except for her master." She closed the door behind them.

"But he's unconscious and injured, too!" By this time they were at the head of the stairs.

"He'll wake before she does," said Nick. "Nat, she's not ours any more." He had to make a visible effort to control his voice. "There's a psychic bond between them, as if they were one person. It might last for the next hundred years."

Nat took the last step, into the downstairs hall. "But you didn't have that with Richard," she protested.

"I didn't give Richard my blood. I didn't want the absolute power a master has over a convert. If I had known..."

Natalie hugged him. "Never mind. That's over."

Janette opened the door.

The darkness was beginning to clear toward dawn. "Nee-co-lah, Nat, come on! I've got to get Alma out of the hospital. She must have finished hypnotizing everyone into believing that Alexandra had a gurney and took Cat out in the freight elevator at gunpoint."

"But couldn't she just hypnotize her way into the bloodbank?" Nat's innate practicality was taking over.

Janette laughed as she started the ignition. "Alma? She's allergic to blood bank preservatives, and to blood from animals. She has to have fresh, human blood. Why do you think she works at the Raven? And why do you think I have to keep such a watch on her?"

"Oh," said Nat, weakly. "But then, why do you let her?"

Janette started the ignition. "That's a long story. Maybe someday I'll tell you."

Part 10

Cat frowned at the carvings on the bedpost. Was she dreaming? Her subconscious seemed to have mixed up the fireplace at home with her bed. Except that her bed didn't have posts. Her room wasn't panelled, or her window— which seemed to have doubled— obscured by dark blue brocade. She looked down at herself. "But I don't have a black lace nightgown!" she said.

"That was Janette's doing." LaCroix was seated beside the bed. He grinned at her. "And the usual phrase is 'where am I?'"

"I know where I am. It wasn't a dream; I did throw Alexandra into the fire." Cat shuddered convulsively.

LaCroix shifted himself to the bed and put his arms around her. "Let it go, Tigress. And if I must cue you, your line is: I'm thirsty." He took a golden goblet from the bedside table and held it to her lips.

She took it out of his hands, finishing it alone before she gave it back to him. LaCroix tried to resume his chair. Cat caught the front of his shirt. "No, you don't! I— Oh!" The fabric had torn under her grasp, revealing the scar over his heart. Cat looked up at him with wide, stricken eyes. "Then I didn't dream that either," she whispered.

"It happened," said LaCroix harshly, turning away.

Cat pulled him back toward her. Her newly acquired, vampire strength caught him off balance, and brought him down beside her. For a moment master and convert stared at each other, then together they burst out laughing. LaCroix reached over and drew Cat into his arms.

She kissed the scar, then began to trace the planes of his face. LaCroix caught her hands and brought them to his lips.

"You know," said Cat softly, "that's not all that happened. You also said, 'I love you.'"

"So I did," LaCroix replied, gently brushing aside the fall of dark golden hair, and kissing her throat.

* * *

LaCroix smiled down at Cat, sleeping beside him. A Mona Lisa smilelet hovered on her lips. When Cat was awake, that expression presaged devilment; he was going to enjoy finding out what she was up to.

Her hair had fallen across her eyes. The ring on his little finger glinted in the light as he brushed it away from her face.

Suddenly LaCroix became Menelaos again, reaching out in the same way to stroke back Arsinoe's hair. Its refusal to behave unless tightly braided and pinned had exasperated her. He had always loved the way it swirled around her shoulders when they were alone together, at night. He used to tease her by tweaking the pins out. She retaliated by threatening to put a spell on him, and he would say that she already had, long ago.

Cat stirred slightly. LaCroix was drawn back to the present. For the first time in twenty-three hundred years, Arsinoe had come to him not as a nightmare, but as a beloved memory. The pain was gone.

On impulse, LaCroix took the ring from his hand. It had been Arsinoe's. Now, inexplicably, he knew that it ought to be Cat's.

Cat's eyelids fluttered. LaCroix told her, "Close your eyes, and give me your hand." He slipped the ring onto her finger.

Still half-asleep, Cat murmured, "That's what you did before."

LaCroix froze. He said very quietly, "What did I do before?"

"You hadn't come back all night after the battle, and nobody'd seen you," Cat spoke softly. "I was sure you were dead. Paulus was gloating about taking me back. I was about to go and buy poison from Elora, when you came into the tent. I was sure you must be a ghost, but you said, 'Close your eyes, and give me your hand,' and you put the ring on my finger."

Before LaCroix could respond, Cat opened her eyes, stretched, and smiled up at him. "Was I talking in my sleep?" she asked.

"Maybe," he answered cautiously. "Do you know what you said?"

"I'm not sure. I think I was dreaming." Cat put her arms around him. "Why, was I talking nonsense?"

LaCroix drew her into his arms. "No," he said, kissing her forehead, "not nonsense." He had never known that Arsinoe's former master had threatened to take her back, the morning after the Battle of Issus, when the rumor of Menelaos's death spread through the camp. Paulus would have been dead, on Menelaos's sword, had he known. He had not known about the poison. But the rest of it was all true.

* * *

In the days that followed, Cat's parents kept up the deception of not knowing where she was, or if she were alive. The detective in charge of the case, granted one more audience by LaCroix, came away with the notion that he had interviewed a man convalescing from a severe heart attack.

* * *

Finally, late at night, Cat's parents left for Toronto. Janette had suggested her flat above the Raven as a venue for their good-byes. Her mortal staffers were well trained and well paid not to notice anomalies; her patrons were routinely not allowed to remember them.

Cat stood alone in the parking lot, after the car was out of sight.

"You'd better come inside, *cherie*, before someone recognizes you from all those police missing posters," Janette said, coming to find her. Cat ducked as she passed her, but not before Janette had seen the red tears in her eyes. "Cat?"

"I'm all right. It's not that I haven't seen them off before. It's just a strange feeling to know that I can't ever go home again, or see Jeffrey or Richard or Aurie." She fought down the catch in her throat. "Never mind. At least I have—" Cat stiffened and her eyes blazed golden. "Oh, my God! I never cancelled the letter to Roland and Kim!"

"What?" Janette's bewilderment was clearly genuine.

"Never mind; there isn't time to explain!" Cat shot off into the air.

* * *

Sharibet and LaCroix confronted each other in the middle of the music room. He stood at military attention, but his height was negated by her empress's carriage. The vampire heartbeat echoed off the panelled walls.

"Why did you disobey my order?" Sharibet spoke with the persistence of beyond-time.

"Because I wanted revenge!" LaCroix's words came as though torn out of him by the rack.

"If you must lie," Sharibet admonished him, "at least lie thoroughly. That's only why you started to disobey. I ask you again, why did you disobey my order?" The light from the Venetian lantern overhead struck blue sparks in the coils of her black, black hair.

"Because I wanted to!" LaCroix's eyes were red; Sharibet's had not lost a tinge of their blackness.

"A little closer, my son." Her tone became almost maternal.

LaCroix fought to keep his master out of the part of his mind that held his memories of Cat.

Sharibet smiled at him. Arctic ice contained more warmth. "And why did you want to?"

It was like being torn on a wheel of fire. LaCroix gasped, "Because I—"

The doors to the music room exploded as Cat kicked them. Behind her one of Sharibet's bodyguards was trying to get up. He was impeded by the remains of the chair which she had smashed over his head and shoulders. The other guard had been sent flying head on into the bronze chimera which stood in a niche halfway up the stairs. He wasn't moving.

Cat marched up to Sharibet. "Whatever you're doing to him, do it to me instead! I was the one who was determined to see how far we could go with this. I should have stopped him the first time he came after me."

LaCroix frantically tried to distract the Oldest of Vampire's attention. Besides, his *amour-propre* was piqued. "You couldn't stop me now with your vampire strength!"

Cat tossed her head impatiently. "I didn't need physical strength! All I had to do was arrange things so that you'd be losing a challenge if you brought me over against my will."

"And a lot of good trying to issue a challenge would have done you without a throat!" returned LaCroix.

"Nonsense! You were having too good a time to do that before you'd finished teaching me to play the lyre."

"So you're Menelaos's Tigress," Sharibet interjected.

Cat rounded on her. "You keep out of this! It's all your fault anyway; you broke him!"

LaCroix wondered if it were possible after all for a vampire to have a heart attack. He'd seen committers of lighter *lese-majeste* compelled to feed themselves to crocodiles. Slowly. He said desperately, "She doesn't know what she's doing—Sharibet. I beg you, it's only convert's raving!"

Cat glared at him with a hint of red in her gold eyes. "No, it isn't, and you keep out of this! Convert's raving, indeed! You told me yourself that heart's blood doesn't create a master, it passes on everything and creates an equal."

Sharibet allowed one eyebrow to lift. LaCroix stepped protectively in front of Cat. Sharibet asked almost wonderingly, "Do you tell me Menelaos gave heart's blood for you? By his own hand?"

Cat insisted on standing beside him. "Yes," she said flatly. "He's got the scar, too."

"So *that's* it," Sharibet said. "Menelaos, why didn't you simply tell me you loved her?" She seated herself on one of the chairs as though on a throne. "Tell me, my son, why do you think I made that prohibition on revenge on Nicholas, or through his family?"

"Roland asked you to, or so I've always understood," said LaCroix, rather sulkily.

"Roland only asked me to forbid anyone to take revenge on Nicholas or his new wife. When I did a little scrying into the future, I saw that one of their children was somehow linked to you. I issued that little injunction because I wanted to see what that link meant. I knew you'd have to pay attention to Nick's children after that, because I'd made it a challenge."

Sharibet favored Cat with a royally gracious smile. "My dear, do you remember my visit to Toronto when you were twelve? I know you do. How Janette could imagine that I wouldn't know you can't be hypnotized, I can't fathom. It was one of the things that intrigued me about your mother. I was delighted at what I saw."

"Something to do with my downfall, no doubt?" LaCroix asked. Cat moved close against his side.

"Let's call it your transformation," Sharibet responded. "I dislike losing. Two thousand years ago I lost, when I brought you across. Cat's quite right. I did break you. And I lost, because you escaped me. The man Menelaos died when the vampire was born. Ever since, there's been a trail of us who weren't quite right, because of what had gone wrong when I made you. Cat's changed that." She took Cat's hand and placed it in LaCroix's. "You were a most unusual mortal, Cat Knight, and you're going to be a most unusual vampire. Even I don't know quite what that means, but I'm going to enjoy finding out— and I'm going to love watching the dance you're going to lead him."

Sharibet rose and walked toward the door. Halfway, she turned and added, "Oh, by the way, Menelaos, you were right to give her the ring."

* * *

It was several months later that Cat put down the English language tourist event sheet for the next month in Venice. "LaCroix, look!" Her laughter echoed in the high-ceilinged palazzo.

LaCroix broke off the improvisation he was playing. He smiled at her. "I hear the Tigress's growl in there. Are you about to plunge us into yet another adventure that would turn my hair white if it weren't already?"

"Not you this time. Remember Greg? You never got to sort him out." She made a paper airplane of the tourist guide and skimmed it at him.

"That alto of his sorted him out quite well on her own," replied LaCroix, catching and unfolding the sheet.

"Not as well as we could," Cat told him. "Musica Renata's going to be in the festival next month. I'm just wondering how Greg would take to a few glimpses of me during the performances."

LaCroix crowed with laughter. "It certainly ought to add spice to his conducting." He glanced down at the program listing and broke into a conspiratorial grin. "Cat, did you see *where* the Renata concert is scheduled?"

"The Palazzo del Orsin, wasn't it? Oh, LaCroix! Is that del Orsin as in those stories about Vittoria and Antonnini?"

"The very same. Tigress, I advised Vittoria's seventh-great grandfather on a few extra touches for his new palazzo."

Cat walked over and seated herself on his lap. "And do you think we can use these touches to restage the concert?"

"Restaging the concert is the least of it. With you for inspiration, my Tigress, we'll have young Greg chasing his tail."

"His tail?" asked Cat, responding to her master's embrace with a quick kiss.

"The one he's going to think he has after we get through with him. Greg's a swine; it's only fitting that he should have a tail!" LaCroix returned the kiss with interest.

— The End —

Forever Schanke

by Don Bassingthwaite

What do you do when your partner thinks he's a vampire? This is Nick's dilemma when Schanke receives a bump on the head...

Part One

Schanke fumbled with his keys, trying to get the proper key lined up with the keyhole. Although the sun was rising, his front door was still in deep shadow. Before he could get the key inserted, though, the door opened, leaving him holding his keys in midair like a character from some old sitcom. He glanced up and smiled wearily. "Honey, I'm home."

Myra put a hand over her mouth and giggled, then gasped when her husband stood up and the light from inside illuminated his face. "Oh, Don!"

"It doesn't really feel as bad as it looks." Schanke stepped inside and looked at himself in the hall mirror. A huge purpling bruise, slightly swollen and with a few small stitches near its centre covered one side of his forehead. He hissed in pain when he saw it. "It feels much worse."

"Poor Don. I was so worried when Nick phoned to say they'd taken you into the hospital." Myra wrapped her housecoat about herself more tightly and shivered.

"Nick's a good partner. He looks after me. And I know he told you to go to bed instead of staying up worrying about me." He swept her into a hug and held her close. "You really should have gotten some sleep. It wasn't that serious. I don't even have a concussion."

"Then what took so long?"

"They wanted to keep me in for observation." Schanke kissed her forehead. "I'm so sorry I couldn't talk to you, honey. They wouldn't let me get up and there was no phone I could use."

"I know. Nick told me. He couldn't say much about what happened though."

He grimaced. "It was a low blow— well, actually it was high blow. We were going in to talk to someone about a case. A witch doctor, believe it or not."

"A witch doctor?"

"It's a long story. But the visit should have been simple. We went up the stairs and knocked on the door. Then we heard a scream."

Schanke's head jerked up as the scream cut through the still night air. His gun was in his hand almost before he had thought about it. Nick had his gun out, too. The partners nodded at each other, moving like a precision machine. Schanke stepped to one side, allowing Nick to kick the door open, then ducked through the doorway with his revolver at the ready.

There was no one in the room within. A hall led to the back of the first floor of the house. A flight of stairs ran up to the second floor. The whole house was silent, although lights seemed to blaze in every room. He gestured up the stairs; the scream had come from there. Still working in complete silence, they went up, Nick in the lead, Schanke covering him. Multiple doors led off from the hallway at the top of the stairs.

"Man, oh man!" whispered Schanke quietly. "Who would have thought a witch doctor could afford a place like this?"

"Don't forget that he's also an author." Nick pointed. "You check those doors. I'll get this one."

He disappeared through a door. Schanke edged carefully along the hall and flung open the first door he found. A bathroom. The second door was a linen cupboard. The third was a bedroom. He stepped inside, just as Nick yelled out "Schank! I've found..."

There was a sudden crash like breaking pottery and then a gunshot. Schanke whirled to go to his partner's assistance— and ran straight into a blow from a club. Everything went black.

Myra switched the light on as they walked into the kitchen. "Oh, Don! That's terrible!"

"I wasn't unconscious long! When I came to, Nick had collared one suspect. Whoever had hit me must have run for it. I don't remember anything. Our witch doctor was dead."

"I don't want to hear about that!" Myra opened a cupboard and got down a plate as she spoke. "I want you to have something to eat. There's some nice fresh bread in the basket on the table, and I've been keeping some stew warm for you all night." A thick, rich aroma wafted through the kitchen as she took the lid off a pot on the stove. She waved a ladle at Schanke. "Sit down!"

Smiling, he sat and allowed her to place a large plate of stew on the table in front of him. "Now I expect to see every bite of that gone when I get back. I'm going to turn down the bed and lay out your pajamas. Then we'll both get some sleep."

"But you have to get up in..."

"No, I don't. I'm taking the day off to spend with you." She kissed him on the top of his head and put a fork in his hand. "Now eat up. I love you."

"I love you, too, honey." Schanke sighed as he watched her leave. Sometimes he wondered how he had ever convinced her to marry him.

He reached for the ketchup that stood on the little lazy susan at the centre of the table and poured a generous blob onto his stew. Spearing a chunk of meat, he lifted it to his mouth.

The blow didn't knock him out completely, but it did leave him pretty badly dazed. He could vaguely recall the sound of fleeing footsteps and a glimpse of some bright colours as someone ran down the stairs. He staggered after them. The sounds of struggle from somewhere stopped him short. Nick. The gunshot! The sounds were directly overhead. An attic. He stumbled into the room Nick had been investigating. In the room beyond it, he could see a ladder running up into the ceiling. He lurched towards it, gun still clenched firmly in his hand, and climbed up.

The attic was decorated with hanging herbs, masks, and bones. The smell of the herbs made Schanke's already throbbing head spin. The first thing he saw was the body of the witch doctor they had come to talk to. The second thing he saw was Nick crouched over another man.

He picked up the bottle again and poured some more ketchup onto his food.

Schanke climbed off of the ladder and took a step forward. A board creaked under his foot. Nick spun around.

The stew was being drowned in ketchup.

His eyes were glowing an evil yellow. His teeth... fangs sprouted from his mouth. There was blood on his face and blood dripped onto the breast of the white sweater that he wore.

Schanke's hand was shaking. Ketchup seemed to pour from the bottle in an endless stream, until it overflowed the plate and dripped onto Myra's white tablecloth.

Part Two

Janette raced into the flat, slamming the door behind her. If she had still been alive, she would have been gasping for breath. Nicholas looked up from the London Times. "What is it?"

"Where is LaCroix?"

"He's gone out." Nicholas turned the page and smiled wryly. "He said he wanted to catch this 'Ripper' fellow in the act. Study his technique."

*"*Merde! *Just when I need him the most!" She began to pace fretfully.*

Nicholas folded the paper with a frown. "Are you in trouble?"

"No... yes! Oh, Nicholas, I haven't been so frightened in a century."

She rushed into his arms and he held her close. The predatory vampiress was shaking. "Hush. What is it?"

"A man..."

"A mortal?" He threw back his head and laughed. "You are afraid of a mortal?"

"He's not like any man I've met. Nicholas, he knows what I am!"

"So make him forget."

"I can't!" she wailed, "He knows I am a vampire, and he's not afraid! He wants to be a vampire too, Nicholas, and he's going to pursue me until I make him one!"

"Why not just kill him? You've certainly done that before."

Janette snarled at him, the feral snarl of a cornered animal. "Don't you think I've tried? He has a crucifix and he has garlic. I can't get close to him. He's stalking me!"

"Where is he now?" asked Nicholas, a chill running up his back.

"Outside. He followed me to this building, but he doesn't know what flat we're in."

Nicholas released her and went to the window. Drawing the heavy velvet curtain aside ever so slightly, he peered down onto the street. Although it was late, there was still quite a bit of traffic. A hansom cab rattled by. A man stood under a lamp post, the gas lantern illuminating his upturned face. He was thin and very dirty, possibly a tinker or a chimney sweep. Nicholas glanced back at Janette. As usual, she was dressed in black, but on the white lace collar at her throat was the dark print of a dirty hand. He turned back to the street.

Schanke looked up at him.

Nick sat up in bed with a start, looking dazedly around his bedroom. It took him a moment to remember what time period he was in, that this was real life and not a memory. Another of immortality's curses. He focused on his alarm clock. It was almost time for him to get up anyway. He swung his feet over the edge of the bed and reached automatically for a cloth to wipe the blood sweat from his forehead.

Schanke had surprised him last night. All of his attention had been on the man who had killed Augustus Nwabe, the West African writer and witch doctor they had gone to consult. He had had a gun—Nick had another bullet hole in his jacket to repair. The man had also been quick, although not quick enough. He had hurled a bowl of chicken blood at him then tried to shoot while the blood distracted him.

The trick might have worked against another cop. All it had done to Nick was enrage him. There were some vampiric reactions that even the strongest will could not control. Nick had been able to fight back the urge to drain the blood from the murderer as he lay unconscious at his feet, but the effort had left him too self-occupied to notice Schanke's approach.

Fortunately, it hadn't been hard to hypnotize Schanke into forgetting what he had seen. The blow he had suffered to the head made it even easier. By the time the ambulance arrived (in spite of Schanke's insistence that it was just a little bump), he had had his partner believing that he had simply been knocked out by his assailant and had not entered the attic. Nick smiled to himself. Schanke was a fine police officer, but he succumbed very easily to hypnotic suggestion.

He padded downstairs to the refrigerator for a little liquid breakfast. The light on his answering machine winked at him accusingly, admonishing him for sleeping instead of answering the phone. He hit the "answer" button as he pulled the cork from a bottle and poured some blood into a coffee mug.

BEEP "Nick— it's Nat. Something for you to think about on the way into work tonight. The punk you brought in had a gun. Nwabe was killed with a knife. Schanke's dance partner might be the man you really want."

Nick grimaced. It had been obvious that the person who had bushwhacked Schanke was the murderer's (or rather, the murder suspect's) partner. He hoped Nat and the boys from Ident would have more for him now.

BEEP "Nick. This is Captain Stonetree."

He set down his mug carefully and turned up the volume on the machine. Stonetree never called him unless it was extremely important.

"Go to St. Joseph's Hospital when you get up tonight. Schanke's Section Eight. He's had a breakdown and he wants to see you."

* * *

The reception desk downstairs gave him Schanke's room number and told him just to ask a candy striper on the floor for directions when he needed them. He didn't need directions though. He could hear Schanke screaming the moment he got off the elevator. A corner room, down past the nurse's station with the security guard and monitor cameras. One of the rooms for dangerous patients. He strode down the corridor, flashing his badge to the guard and dodging around a candy striper passing out little containers of juice under the watchful eye of another guard. A uniformed officer stopped him at the door. "Excuse me, Detective Knight, but I'll have to ask you to leave any crosses or rosaries with me."

Nick blinked and almost smiled. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, sir. They upset Detective Schanke."

The almost smile turned into a deeply concerned frown. "I don't have any. Who's here?"

"Captain Stonetree. Mrs. Schanke. Dr. Wells, the psychiatrist."

"Thanks." He opened the door and the screaming hit him almost like a fist. Captain Stonetree looked up and waved him inside. Schanke was curled up under the bed clothes, shrieking incoherently. Myra sat beside the bed. She smiled wearily at Nick. Her face was pinched with stress.

"How long has he been like this?" Nick whispered to Stonetree.

"All day, pretty much." A thin, balding man turned away from one of the two big windows in the room. "Mrs. Schanke found him at the kitchen table just after dawn, shaking uncontrollably. He started screaming when we brought him in. Frankly, I'm surprised he hasn't torn his vocal cords."

"Nick," Stonetree said quietly, "this is Dr. Wells, the force psychiatrist."

Nick nodded at the doctor. "We've met," he said flatly.

"Ah, yes. The young lady whose boyfriend was murdered? I understand her testimony put the killer behind bars. I'm glad I could be of assistance." He smiled, the same sort of smile a fish might give. "How is she?"

"She committed suicide."

"How terrible."

"Have you tried sedating Detective Schanke?" Nick asked, dragging the conversation back to the matter at hand.

"Of course. Unfortunately, he can't keep anything down for more than a few seconds. When we tried to give him an injection, he became so violent that four men couldn't hold him still." He shrugged. "As long as we leave him alone and let him cower under the blankets, though, he doesn't move."

Nick's mouth twitched. "He was calling for me?"

"One of the few understandable things he's said all day." Dr. Wells walked over to stand beside the bed. He gestured Myra back. She stood up obediently and went to Stonetree, grasping Nick's hand gratefully on the way past.

"Don?" called Wells, as if he were talking to someone in the next room, "Don? Nick Knight's here like you asked."

The screaming stopped. "Nick?" Schanke's voice was hoarse and muffled.

"I'm here, Schank." Nick stepped closer to the bed. Wells hovered over his shoulder until Nick pushed him firmly away. "What is it?"

There was a pause before Schanke asked, "Is it safe to talk?"

Nick looked up at Wells, Stonetree and Myra, then replied, "It's safe. What do you want to talk about?"

"You know!" The tone of Schanke's voice made it clear he thought Nick was a moron for even asking the question. "Has the sun set?"

"What?"

"Has the sun... never mind. If you're here, it must have." Schanke threw back the blankets and sat up. He was still dressed in the clothes he had worn the night before. "Man, you wouldn't believe how thin the curtains in this place are." He looked around and started when he saw the others in the room. He pulled Nick close.

"I thought you said it was safe to talk!" he whispered.

"It is!" Nick's forehead creased with concern, even as his voice took on a cajoling note. "Your own wife, Captain Stonetree..."

"And Wells. Yeah, right." He glanced at the psychiatrist. "You wouldn't believe the stuff that he tried to push on me! It's tough trying to pull this crazy act all day!"

"Crazy act?"

"I don't know how you do it." He slapped Nick on the shoulder. "Now get me out of here, wonder boy. Don't worry— I didn't tell them a thing about us. Did you bring the stuff?"

"Us? The stuff? What are you talking about, Schank? What stuff?"

Schanke gave him a lopsided grin. "Cute, partner, but it gets tiring really quickly. The red stuff. The ruby elixir. The haemoglobin. I'm famished, Knight, and I don't think they're about to let me into the blood bank."

Nick looked straight into Schanke's face. Schanke smiled back. There wasn't a hint of deception in that smile. "You're... a vampire?"

"You know I am— Dad."

Part Three

Stonetree, Nat and Dr. Wells watched with repulsed fascination as Schanke drank the warm, thick, red liquid from the beaker. The detective was sitting atop one of the desks back down at the police station. Nick hovered beside him, watching carefully as his partner gulped the stuff down. Schanke himself eyed his audience warily. He leaned over to Nick and whispered, "Are you sure I can get away with doing this so openly?"

"Trust me, Schank. They think it's tomato juice warmed-up in the microwave."

"So how come you never do this in front of people?"

"This is an emergency."

"Oh." Schanke drained the beaker, then licked his lip. "You know, I never expected blood to be so... acidic."

"Well, you never know until you try, do you?" He slapped Schanke heartily on the back and glanced up at Nat and Stonetree, shaking his head.

Stonetree blinked. "Uhh... Nick, could I see you in my office? Schanke... do some paperwork or something."

"Sure thing, Captain." Schanke jumped off the desk, grinning at Nick. "It's so easy to fool them!" he said quietly.

Nick smiled thinly, then followed Stonetree, Nat, and Dr. Wells into the captain's office. Once inside, he let out a long breath. "I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

"There's no telling how long the traumatized state will last," Wells stated simply. "At least in a more familiar setting, the recovery process should proceed more quickly. It was a good idea to move him out of the hospital, Detective Knight. Interesting idea to trick him with tomato juice, too. Where did you learn so much about psychology?"

"I took some courses. In university."

"Can't you just knock him on the head again or something?" asked Stonetree. "It's a little weird having one of my top men thinking he's a vampire."

Nick couldn't resist stealing a secret glance at Nat. She smiled back and commented aloud, "That only works in cartoons, Captain."

Dr. Wells made a sour face. "Please. I'm the psychiatrist here." He turned back to Stonetree. "Dr. Lambert is right. Another blow to the head would not necessarily just reverse the damage, especially since we don't know why he has fixated on this idea that Detective Knight is a vampire and has turned him into a vampire as well."

Nick shifted uncomfortably. "The suspect threw a bowl of blood in my face during the arrest. Schanke saw me with the blood on my face after he had been hit."

"Nick has an allergy to sunlight, too," Stonetree added. "Schanke only sees him at night. He's also allergic to garlic and he never eats around the station." He spoke the words lightly, but their speaking left an uncomfortable silence in the room.

Nat broke it with a casual laugh. "Maybe he really is a vampire? Go on, Nick, say 'I vant to suck your blooood'!" To Nick's ears, the joke sounded as forced and desperate as it really was, but it made Stonetree and even Dr. Wells chuckle. Nick mouthed a silent "thank you" to Nat.

"So what do we do about Schanke?"

Dr. Wells gave a little shrug. "I think the best thing to do is simply let him act out his vampire fantasy."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" asked Nat with some concern.

"It seems the safest course of action. I'm reluctant to hospitalize him. I think he'll be fine as long as he's supervised. We wouldn't want him to, say, bite someone. I would recommend assigning someone to stay with him. Detective Knight, for example."

Nick looked up sharply. "Me?"

"He looks up to you as a mentor right now anyway."

Stonetree nodded slowly. "It's a good idea. Why don't you have him stay at your place during the day, too? I've been in your apartment— I know he won't have to worry about seeing the sun."

"Now hold on a second!"

"It's Schanke's best chance for a recovery."

"All right!"

"One more thing, Captain," Wells added, "I think it would be best if you were to take Detective Schanke off active duty for a while."

"Of course."

"And Detective Knight."

"What?"

"He'll be watching over Detective Schanke."

"He's one of my best men— I don't need two down at once!"

"But as you said, Captain, it's Schanke's best chance for a recovery." Wells smiled.

Nick walked Nat out to her car. "I'm surprised Wells made it out of there in one piece."

"I'm surprised Stonetree got him to bend enough to let you keep the case and babysit Schanke."

"Yeah, well, when you're this close to breaking a case..."

"I know. Oh!" She pulled a folder out of her briefcase. "I almost forgot. The autopsy report on Augustus Nwabe."

"Anything strange?"

"Multiple stab wounds, all in the back. Died from loss of blood. No signs of struggle— it looks like the killer took him by surprise."

"So not the same killer as the original body?" Two weeks ago, the body of a prostitute had been found dumped in the Don River. A single knife thrust through the heart had killed her. There had been a fetish, tentatively identified by an expert as derived from an African design. Knight and Schanke had hoped Augustus Nwabe might have been able to tell them more.

"Ah-ha! There's where you're wrong." Nat flipped open the folder. "Obsidian chips in both wounds. Someone out there is using an obsidian knife— not a particularly common item." Nick whistled and she nodded. "More on the suspect you arrested– he's left-handed and the knife wounds were definitely made by a right-handed person."

"Damn."

"On the other hand, Ident found drops of blood matching Nwabe's blood type downstairs in the room where Schanke was ambushed. The ambusher is your man."

"Well, that's something." He smacked the top of her car with an open hand. "I wonder if Schanke saw anything that could identify the killer. I should have thought before I hypnotized him!"

"Can you reverse the hypnosis? That might help with his delusions, too."

"I'm not sure I want to try. It may have been some combination of hypnosis, trauma, and shock that triggered the whole thing. Nat, what am I supposed to with him?"

"Ask Janette to watch him?"

"She won't let him anywhere near the Raven after the last time I tried to talk her into doing that." He looked up at her hopefully.

Nat blinked and took a step backwards. "Oh, no. Not on your life!"

"Please?"

"Sorry, Nick." She got into her car and started the engine. "This one is definitely your problem." She put the car into reverse, backed out of her parking space, shifted again and drove away.

Nick looked back at the door of police headquarters to find Schanke standing on the steps, a big smile on his face, waiting for him.

* * *

Nicholas stepped away from the window. "I'm sorry, Janette. This is your problem."

"But Nicholas, he frightens me!"

"What would you expect LaCroix to do? Go out and kill him for you? Simply wave his hands and make him vanish? The time will come when you are going to have to stand on your own two feet. Without LaCroix."

She surged forward and stuck him. Struck him hard enough to send him sprawling backwards over a chesterfield. "As you have been trying so hard to do?" she replied acidly. "Very well. I will deal with him." She gathered her skirts and stepped towards the door, leaving Nicholas lying somewhat dazed on the floor. "Wish me luck, mon amour."

Janette opened the door, then fell back with a startled scream. The man Nicholas had seen from out of the window walked into the room, a cross held out in front of him.

Part Four

Schanke felt as if he were simply being drawn along in Nick's wake as his partner slipped from shadow to shadow in the darkened corridors of the house. Knight moved like an animal, feral and alert, stalking his prey. Only this animal's prey was a man. He caught a glimpse of movement ahead, the flash of a light-coloured coat. Nick paused for a moment and Schanke almost ran into him. He had a lot to learn. Even Nick's sudden leap around an unseen corner startled him. So did the short cry of surprise, abruptly cut off, and the savage sounds of a feeding beast. He turned the corner.

Nick glared up at him, snarling. Animals don't like to be disturbed when they're eating. He crouched over the body of the man in the light-coloured coat, blood staining his clothes and face. Schanke's gaze was drawn to Nick's prey. It was himself.

He woke into darkness with a scream, and for a moment wondered if he was still dreaming. Strange shadows loomed in the darkness around him, odd creaks and groans filled the air. He twisted around and then plunged through the air, slamming hard into something. He must have cried out again, because suddenly the lights snapped on and he saw Nick standing on the balcony outside his bedroom. The shadows were Nick's living room furniture and the terrifying plunge had been a fall from his sofa.

"Are you okay, Schank?"

"Yeah." He picked himself up and swallowed. "Yeah, I'm fine. This fireplace of yours can really give you the willies if you're not used to it." He ran his fingers through his hair. "What time is it, anyway?"

"About four o'clock in the afternoon. The sun will still be up for a few more hours. Try to go back to sleep. You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Knight."

The lights went back out. Schanke settled back down on the sofa. The instant he closed his eyes, however, the vision of Nick, his face covered in blood, came back. He reached desperately behind him for the lamp that stood on the end-table. The light banished the vision and he sighed with relief.

Behind the door of his bedroom, Nick heard the faint click of the switch and rolled over in bed. Well, Nicholas, he thought to himself, you've quite outdone yourself this time. He closed his eyes and tried to will himself deep into the arms of daytime oblivion. Oblivion came slowly, however. First, there were the memories.

Janette hissed and spat as the man advanced into the room, but retreated before the cross that he held. Nick, just rising from behind the overturned chesterfield flinched back as well. The man's attention, however, was solely on Janette.

"What, Jeanie? No 'ugs for your old beau?" He laughed. Nick could smell the garlic on him. The stench made his knees weak and he had to clutch at the chesterfield for support.

"Go away, Tom! I will not give you what you want!"

"Oh, I think you will." He shoved the cross at her and she screamed again. "Most people will do almost anything to save their 'ides. I'm ready to lay even odds that vampires will, too. 'Specially when not co-operating could bring around some very nasty attention."

He looked around. "Nice little place..." He paused as he noticed Nick, pale and unsteady, for the first time. "'Oo's this then? Jeanie, 'ave you been cheating on me— or just snacking between meals?"

"Tom..."

"Shush up! It doesn't matter 'oo 'e is." Keeping the cross trained on Janette, Tom gestured at Nick. "Move it, mate. Get out of 'ere. She's mine."

It took a moment for the significance of Tom's words to sink into Nick's mind.

Tom thought he was just another one of Janette's victims. That he was human.

* * *

Schanke's stomach grumbled loudly as he got out of Nick's Caddy. "Shhh," he told it reassuringly, "I'll get you something soon. Hey Knight, when do we eat again? I could use a... bite." He laughed at his own joke.

"Later, Schank." Nick slammed his door and came around to join his partner on the other side of the car. "You just polished off a bottle of my best an hour ago."

"Yeah? Well, it takes a lot to keep the beast here happy." He patted his stomach and laughed again, missing the dark look that Nick gave him. "But... business before pleasure. What did you say this woman's name was again?"

The house in front of which they had parked was dark and brooding, with ivy hanging from the crumbling bricks and fading roses climbing rotting trellises. A clump of hair, long and dark, braided with feathers and herbs, and topped with the skull of some small rodent hung beside the door. "She calls herself 'Sister'. She was the last name in Augustus Nwabe's appointment book the night he was murdered."

"A witch doctor had an appointment book?"

"Even witch doctors like to be organized."

"Oookkaaayyy." Schanke turned back to look at the house. "How did they manage to track down this 'Sister' anyway?"

"Looked in the phone book." The old wooden steps of the porch creaked as Nick led the way up to the door. "Apparently it's her legal name. She's a witch doctor, too."

"Wonderful."

Schanke's stomach growled again. Nick frowned. He had fed Schanke more warm tomato juice, liberally laced with one of Nat's protein supplements, after they had risen earlier that evening. But while Schanke might think he was a vampire, his body knew differently. Nick wondered how long his partner would be able to keep going.

More importantly, he wondered how long he would be able to keep going himself—he hadn't had any blood since Stonetree had called him to the hospital. He had dumped the stock he normally kept in his apartment for fear of Schanke accidentally getting into it. Drinking large quantities of blood could make a human seriously ill. Deep inside himself, he could feel his hunger stirring at the mere thought of blood. As he pushed the doorbell, he wished that tomato juice could satisfy him the way it satisfied Schanke.

Part Five

An assistant showed them into Sister's "office." It reminded Schanke more of a set from a voodoo movie. In a way, it was like Augustus Nwabe's attic. Masks hung on the walls, along with an assortment of bones. There were containers of herbs sitting along a sideboard. The smell in the room was much like the smell in Nwabe's attic as well, an odour that reminded him vaguely of something he couldn't quite remember, but which he knew was unpleasant. He shook his head to clear it.

A small table at the end of the room caught his eye. Some large object covered with a black cloth dominated the table, surrounded by a clutter of smaller objects. A mirror, a skull, a vase of peacock feathers, a very small gaudily-decorated bowl... He blinked and his eyes shot back to the bowl. There was something in it, something red and liquid. His stomach growled again and he licked his lips. Nick was looking the other way. Surely a little snack couldn't hurt. It was just like dipping a finger into Myra's stew pot before supper. He wandered casually over towards the table.

"Can I help you, officers?"

The new voice made him jump. A woman, tall and extremely fair, had entered the room. Schanke was secretly pleased to see that his partner was just as surprised by her sudden appearance as he was; usually nobody got the drop on Nick. He recovered quickly, however, and shook his head politely.

"No, I'm sorry. We're here to see Sister."

"I'm Sister."

Schanke blinked. "We were expecting someone..."

"A little less white?" Sister moved around to sit behind a desk. Schanke looked around for somewhere to sit as well, but there were no other chairs in the room. The detectives were forced to remain standing. "The power of the spirits doesn't recognize race. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Detective Knight and this is Detective Schanke." Nick stepped forward, flashing his badge. "We're investigating two murders, including the death of Augustus Nwabe. We were hoping you could answer a few questions for us."

"I saw his obituary in the paper today. I visited him the night he died."

"That's why we wanted to talk to you." Schanke glanced at the table again, then began to casually walk around the room, inspecting the items on the walls. "You were apparently the last person to see him alive."

"It is possible. It was late when I left him."

"Why were you visiting him in the first place?"

"Augustus was my mentor. He taught me a great deal. I'm going to miss him."

Schanke tuned out the questions his partner was asking of the witch doctor. All of his concentration was on that bowl of blood. Slowly he was making a circuit of the room and approaching the table it was on once more. Make it natural, Don, he told himself. He paused briefly in front of a shawl woven from eye-burningly bright yarn and draped over a coat rack. Like the smell in the room, it stirred a memory of Augustus Nwabe's house. He reached out to touch it...

"Please, Detective Schanke! That is my ceremonial shawl. Don't touch it!"

"Sorry. It's just so beautiful."

"It's one of a kind. I made it myself." She turned her attention back to Nick. "Is there anything else, Detective Knight?"

The edge of their conversation forced itself onto Schanke's awareness as he took the last few steps towards the table and the bowl of blood. Nick had brought the fetish that had been found on the dead prostitute's body. He was showing it to Sister and she was nodding. "I think I recognize it. It's a West African cult symbol from a very old cult. They were wiped out in the early eighteenth century by the people of the area..."

Finally Schanke found himself standing in front of the table, the bowl in front of him, beckoning him like a jewel. Quickly, he dipped a finger into the blood and brought it up to his mouth. He hesitated, then licked the blood off. The taste spread through his mouth, salty and warm. He was considering trying for a second dip when he realized that both Sister and Nick were silent.

He turned around slowly. They were watching him intently, Nick with a carefully blank look, Sister with some shock. He blinked, then scrambled for the first words that came into his mind. "This is real blood, isn't it?".

"It's cow, Detective Schanke." A harsh edge crept into Sister's voice. "There's nothing illegal about that. I use it in my ceremonies— that is my private altar you are fondling. Please leave it alone!"

"Schanke," said Nick quietly. "Why don't you come over here and join us?"

Red-faced, he did. Nick looked angry— he could practically see rage radiating from him. Sister seemed angry, too. Her eyes narrow, she stared at him for a second before turning back to Nick. "As I was saying," she continued, "the cult was wiped out by the people when they discovered that it was practicing human sacrifice. The incident was recorded by Islamic scholars in the region and has subsequently made its way into any number of books on African magic." She turned the fetish over in her hands. "I suspect that you may be dealing with some amateur magicians who are getting carried away with their dabbling."

"Dabbling?" Nick leaned forward slightly, resting his hands on her desk. "Sister, this is a little more serious than Satanic graffiti."

"I realize that, Detective Knight. I'd like to do anything I can to help." She opened a drawer in her desk. "I may have a book here that describes the story of the cult in more detail. You're welcome to take it with you."

Schanke could just see into the drawer she had opened. It was crammed full of papers and knick-knacks. Sister tossed some of the contents out of the drawer and onto the desk top as she searched. A crumpled feather missed the desk and drifted to the floor. Several sheets of paper spread piled up on top of the ones already on the desk. A long gold chain skittered across the desk... the ornate crucifix on the end of it brushing Nick's fingers.

Nick jumped back with a hiss. Schanke flinched back from the cross as well, certain that something nasty would happen if he got to close to it. Sister looked up in alarm. "Detective Knight?"

"It's nothing. A paper cut."

She smiled. "Hurt like the devil, don't they? I'm afraid the book isn't here, though. Would you like me to drop it off at the police station when I find it?"

"That would be helpful. Thank you for your time, Sister."

"You're welcome. And Detective Schanke?"

"Yes?"

"I don't have any use for this, but your children might like it." She held out an oblong black glass paperweight with strangely faceted sides. "It's obsidian from Africa."

He took it from her gingerly, keeping his arm as far away as possible from the cross on the desk. "My daughter does collect rocks. But how did you know I had a kid?"

"The spirits told me," Sister said mysteriously, then she laughed. "The spirits, your wedding ring and a lucky guess!"

Back in the car, Schanke sat silently as Nick drove back to the police station. Nick was silent, too, intent on the road. Schanke tried to catch his eye several times, but failed. Finally, he said simply, "That was a pretty stupid thing to do with the blood, wasn't it."

"Damn stupid." Nick flicked the turn signal and made a left so sharp that Schanke rocked in his seat.

"You're mad."

"I'm not mad, I'm in a hurry. It was damn stupid— and damn lucky. Here, put this over the hand that you dipped in the blood." He pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket and made another turn.

"This isn't the way to the station." Schanke slipped his hand into the bag. "Where are we going?"

"This is a short cut. We're going to the Coroner's building. I want Natalie to scrape any blood reside out from under your fingernails and run a DNA comparison."

"Against who?"

"Augustus Nwabe." Nick glanced over at Schanke. "That was human blood in that bowl."

"What? Sister said it was cow."

Nick shifted uncomfortably. "There's a big difference between human blood and cow blood. You'll learn. Besides," he said, changing the conversation abruptly, "there's this." He picked up the chunk of obsidian.

"A paperweight?"

"It's not a paperweight. Nat told me she thinks that Nwabe and the prostitute were both killed with an obsidian knife." He juggled the obsidian around in his hand so that the facets on its surface ran vertically rather than horizontally. "I did some... I took some archaeology courses. This is a blade core— it's what you get after you make obsidian knives."

"Son of a...!" Schanke slumped back in his seat. "I would have given it to Jenny without being any the wiser and we'd be left without evidence. Sister was using me to get rid of it."

"Bingo." He pulled up in front of the coroner's building. "Now let's see if Nat can tell us something less circumstantial so we can take out a search warrant."

Part Six

Schanke yawned as they pulled up in front of Sister's house for the second time later that night. Nick looked over at him with some concern. "How are you doing, Schanke?"

His partner blinked groggily. "Guess I still have to get used to sleeping during the day, huh?" He looked out the window at the house. "The light in her office is still on."

"Good, then she's still up." Nick dug into his coat pocket, pulling out the search warrant and a revolver. "Here." He handed the revolver to Schanke.

"My gun! Bless you, Knight, you are a miracle worker!"

"It wasn't easy getting that away from Stonetree. He still thinks you're some kind of crazy." Nick hesitated, then added, "Hopefully you won't need it."

Schanke laughed as he flung open his door and flicked a finger under his teeth. "With these babies? Why would a vampire even need a gun?"

"No!" He jumped out of his side of the car and motioned to Schanke over the roof. "Schank... don't use your vampire abilities if you don't have to. It makes things hard to explain."

"Ahhh..." Schanke nodded wisely. "Makes sense. Thanks, Nick. It's good to know you're looking out for me."

Nick sighed as he followed Schanke up the walk to Sister's front door. He fervently hoped that nothing happened at all. If Schanke had to fire his gun, he would quickly realize that it was loaded only with blanks. That had been Stonetree's condition for giving Nick the gun, a condition to which Nick had readily agreed. Although carrying a gun into the search gave Schanke a kind of security blanket, not even he wanted Schanke to have a loaded gun.

And that meant if he actually tried to use it, Schanke would very likely become a sitting target. Although if he tried to use his non-existent vampire powers, of course...

* * *

Struggling against the pain and nausea that washed over him, Nick staggered towards Tom. "No," he croaked.

"No?" Tom echoed in disbelief. "Mate, you must 'ave it real bad to try and defend this little birdie. Shove off— she's mine." A penknife flashed in his hand, hardly enough to kill someone with, but more than enough to open a vein so that a person could drink from it. Janette stiffened.

"No." Nick managed to manoeuvre himself so that Tom's body was between him and the cross. The garlic the man carried about himself kept him too weak to do anything, but at least he could stand upright. "There's another one of them. If you force her to make you immortal, you'll have to deal with two of them."

Tom glanced at Janette. "Is that right, Jeannie darlin'?"

"Yes," she spat.

"You couldn't take on two of them," Nick continued. "You're going to have to kill her."

Janette screamed. "Nicolah!"

He ignored her, concentrating on Tom. Janette had said that the foul little man seemed immune to her hypnotic powers. Nick concentrated on using his all-too-human powers of persuasion, long left to lie fallow in favour of more powerful vampiric abilities. "That evens the odds. But you'll still be weak, Tom. You need an ally. Two against one."

"And where do you I suggest I find an ally?"

"There's enough blood in her for two. Most of it's mine anyway."

"Nicolah! No!" Janette took a step forward, but Tom waved her back with the cross. "I thought you loved me!"

Nick swallowed, hoping Tom had bought it— and hoping that Janette understood what he was up to. He was fairly certain of the latter. He wasn't at all sure of the former.

Slowly, Tom nodded. "All right. You got yourself a deal. But," *he added, "I go first." He took a step back towards Nick. "You hold this and keep it up where she can see it." He held out the cross for Nick to grab.*

The haze of garlic this close to Tom almost brought Nick to his knees. Tom had to believe that he was human for a few moments more. Trying to ignore the garlic stench and the burning pain, Nick accepted the cross.

* * *

No one answered Schanke's repeated pounding on the front door or his shouted announcements of their identities. He glanced at Nick and shrugged, then drew his gun and pointed it at the lock. Nick grabbed the gun away from him.

"Let's try something a little more simple first, shall we?" He tried the doorknob. It opened easily.

Schanke flushed as he took his gun back. "Sorry. Too caught up in the excitement."

"You're not a cadet, Schank." Nick drew his own gun and held it at the ready. "I know the last couple of days have been hard on you, but things will get better. You'll get through this."

"Get through what?"

Nick cursed himself silently. "The change, Schanke," he lied. "You'll get used to being a vampire." He leaned his head back and shouted into the house. "Metro Toronto Police. We have a warrant to search these premises and we're coming in."

Again there was no response. The partners exchanged glances and nodded. Nick dodged in through the door first, with Schanke hot on his heels. They paused inside, backs to the wall, scanning the shadowy interior.

"Anybody at home?" Schanke whispered.

"I don't ..." Nick began automatically, then stopped, almost smiling. The scent of human blood had assailed his nostrils the moment they had stepped inside, so thick that it blotted out any other smells. Normally he wouldn't have been able to tell Schanke about it without giving himself away, but as long as Schanke thought he was a vampire too, it was perfectly safe. "Blood. That way."

"The office."

They crept silently through the house, Nick leading Schanke through the darkness until strong light stabbed out from a doorway ahead. Nick held up a hand to stop Schanke for a moment. The smell of blood was so strong it was driving the hungry Beast inside him wild. "I don't know if I can make it," he murmured. "There's something dead up there. She might have committed suicide."

Schanke touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Let me go first."

"No!"

"Look, I'm not having as much trouble as you are. It makes more sense for me to go."

It made too much sense. Nick nodded weakly and switched places with his partner. They covered the last few paces up to the door, then, with a quick nod, Schanke disappeared around the corner.

Nick waited for what seemed like an eternity before Schanke called, "It's clear!" Carefully he poked his head around the corner.

There was indeed a body in the room, but it was not Sister. The assistant who had escorted them into her office earlier lay sprawled on the floor, his throat cut. His blood was smeared around the body in a broad circle. A line of blood connected the circle around the body with a second smaller circle drawn around Sister's altar. The large object on the altar that had been covered in cloth formerly was uncovered now. It was a larger representation of the fetish that had been found on the murdered prostitute.

Schanke stood just outside the large circle. "I think we've found our cult, but I also think the murderer is gone." He stepped into the circle and picked up a small object laying atop the body. He held it up. "Another fetish."

Steeling himself, Nick stepped into the room, walking over to join Schanke by the body. Just as he set his foot inside the circle, though, he glanced up at Sister's desk— in time to see Sister herself appear from behind it, an obsidian knife in her hand. With a shout, he swung his gun towards her. She gestured casually in response.

The circle of blood burst into dark, smoking red flames. Nick tried to jump aside, but the fire licked at his leg and he screamed in pain, dropping his gun. Gasping in agony, he fell inside the circle. Schanke caught him and eased him to the floor as his gun skittered away... outside the circle.

Part Seven

Even as his mind was trying to figure what the hell was going on, Schanke's reflexes took over. With one hand supporting a whimpering Nick, he drew his revolver with the other and fired three quick shots point blank at Sister. Nothing happened. "Son of a bitch!"

Sister laughed, the fringes of her ceremonial shawl shaking in time. "The spirits must be protecting me tonight, Detective Schanke!" She picked up Nick's gun and set it on her desk. "I suggest that you not try to leave the circle. Augustus Nwabe taught me the magic himself. The flames are a ward against spirits and creatures of the night. To a human being like me, they are as hot as normal fire, but no more. To a vampire... well, you can see what they did to your partner." She stepped closer fearlessly. "Wake him up, please. I want to talk to both of you."

"I am awake." Nick sat upright slowly, hissing in pain as he shifted his burned leg. The slightest hint of gold showed in his eyes. "We're police – you're under arrest for the murder of Augustus Nwabe."

"You're vampires, and I hardly think you're in a position to arrest me." Sister pulled out a crucifix, the same one she had so casually tossed onto the desktop earlier. Nick flinched back before it was even clearly visible. The glow in his eyes became brighter. "Yes, I killed Augustus – he could have told you all about my followers and I."

"Your shawl!" gasped Schanke. In his mind's eye, he saw a flash of colour disappearing down the stairs in Augustus Nwabe's house, even as he staggered to help Nick in the attic. "You knocked me out!"

"I'm surprised it was so easy," she said with a nod. "But then again, it was remarkably easy to draw you two back here as well."

"The obsidian core was a lure."

"A calculated guess. A good forensic pathologist might have determined that the murder weapon was an obsidian knife and told you so. Of course, I was also hoping that Detective Schanke had noticed my lie that the bowl on my altar contained human blood and not cow." Sister shook her head. "That was also my first clue that you were more than human. I honestly didn't think that vampires could be so..."

"Stupid?" Schanke supplied, flushing. "Why you...!"

"Easy, Schank. Control yourself." Nick's eyes betrayed his own mood, however, as he turned back to Sister. "All right— you know. What do you want from us?"

"I want your power. I want you to do as I say, to be my servants, the protectors of my cult. You can cover up any stray bodies that turn up from the cult rituals— like that prostitute a few weeks ago."

"And what will you do if we say 'no'?" Schanke stood as close as he dared to the flames.

"I could reveal your existence to the world— to your wife and daughter, Detective Schanke. Do they know about you? Or I could just incinerate you." Stepping to the altar, she dipped her fingers in the bowl of blood and flicked several drops into the flames at his feet. The fire flared up as if the blood had been lighter fluid, forcing Schanke to jump back.

The flare startled Nick, too. He hunched suddenly like a surprised animal, gold eyes and long fangs reflecting the dull, ruddy light. Schanke shuddered and glanced away. "You wouldn't get away with that, you know," Nick spat. "We took out a search warrant. The police force knows we're here."

"What have I got to lose, Detective Knight? I think that I would have trouble explaining a dead body and a room smeared with blood under any circumstances, don't you? Two missing police officers would certainly be the least of my worries. What do you say to my little... proposal?"

Nick grimaced and tried to make eye contact with Schanke, but his partner seemed to be off in his own little world, his gaze fixed somewhere off in the distance. He swallowed. He wasn't afraid to die if he had to, but Schanke... he couldn't let Schanke die, too. "You've got us in a spot, Sister," he began carefully.

Schanke stood up gingerly, his head throbbing. Everything was spinning. He found his gun only a few inches from his hand and staggered over to the stairs. The bright flash of a colourful shawl, Sister's shawl, disappeared down them. He saw that only out of the corner of his eye, though. His attention was focused on the next room and the ladder that ran up into the attic.

He could hear sounds from up there as he climbed. Terrible sounds that he didn't want to hear, but that forced themselves on him anyway. The sounds of a struggle (Nick grappling with his prey). The faint splash of liquid (blood falling to the floor). Something heavy falling (Nick's prey as the blood was drawn from his body). He stepped off the ladder and onto the attic floor. Augustus Nwabe's corpse stared up at him but he ignored it just as he had ignored Sister. Nick still had his back to him. Schanke took a step forward, waiting for a board to creak under him.

There was nothing. He took another step. Then another. And another, until he was right behind Nick. Then a board creaked.

Nick stood up and turned so quickly that Schanke barely had time to draw another breath before he found himself trapped by those terrible yellow–gold eyes. His heart shook inside him and the blood in his pounding head seem to echo with its beat.

"Forget this, Schanke," Nick whispered, "forget you've seen this."

He nodded, still lost in his partner's gaze but all the more aware of the blood that dripped through his peripheral vision. "You're a vampire."

"I'm just like you, Schank. I'm just like you."

Those four words whirled around his brain like some madcap carousel. He repeated them slowly, staring back into Nick's eyes. "I'm just like you."

"Yes."

"I'm just like you."

"No!" Someone grabbed his shoulders and whirled him around. It was Nick as well, but Nick like he looked everyday when Schanke saw him at work – a little pale, a little bit in need of a shave, but no fangs, no blood, no yellow eyes. "No! You're human, Schank. You're human, like me."

"No! You're like me!" Schanke felt himself grabbed and turned again. It was himself this time, but himself with terrible gold eyes and wicked fangs, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and down onto his pale trenchcoat.

"No!"

"Like me!"

"Just like me!"

"You're just like me!"

"Nooo!!" Schanke screamed.

"No," Schanke interrupted quietly, cutting off his partner. "We can't work for you, Sister. We won't." Before Nick could protest, Schanke turned around and glanced into his eyes briefly. "Not all of us are monsters... like you."

"I see." Sister was remarkably calm. "I'll have to kill you now, you know." She picked up the bowl of blood from the altar and stepped closer to the flames.

"I know." Schanke took off his trenchcoat and held it in his arms, his head high.

"Detective Knight?"

Nick hesitated. Schanke had some kind of plan— but what? He would be of little help himself. The fiery circle was torture to him. What could Schanke hope to accomplish on his own? Still... he lifted his head, eyes and fangs gleaming. "We'll die together."

"Too bad." Sister lifted the bowl. Blood glistened in the fire light and spilled out.

With a sudden shout of "Now!" Schanke fell to his knees. Hands swathed in his trenchcoat, he scrubbed at the bloody ring that fuelled the fierce flames. The cloth smouldered and then burst into flames itself, but at least the flames were normal, healthy, and yellow. The red fires winked out just as the blood from Sister's bowl splashed onto the ground.

Sister barely had time to shriek before Nick was upon her. Hunger gnawed at him, but he forced himself to look into her eyes and not at her slim white throat. "We are not vampires," he ordered her. "You will forget what happened here."

"I... I..."

"Forget!" he commanded. "We are not vampires."

Sister's will broke. "You are not vampires," she repeated woodenly.

"Good." Nick nodded. "Sleep." He laid her carefully on the floor, then turned back to Schanke.

"That was brilliant, Schank! You saved us!"

Schanke, still kneeling on the floor, looked up at him. The remains of his trenchcoat smoked by his knees and his hands were already turning red. His eyes were bright. "That's great, pal," he said unsteadily, "but just tell me one thing."

"Sure."

"What the hell just happened?" Schanke's eyes rolled back in his head and he fell forward into Nick's arms.

Part Eight

Nick was just raising his hand to knock on the door of the hospital room when it opened of its own accord and Nick found himself about to knock on Dr. Wells' forehead. The psychiatrist was already red in the face, and the look he gave Nick was murderous. Laughter drifted out of the room after him.

"Sorry, doctor," Nick stammered. "Say, is that tomato juice on your shirt?"

"Yes," the doctor replied tightly, "yes, it is. I'm afraid Detective Schanke is backsliding."

"You should get some water or club soda on that, or the stain will never come out."

"Thank you, Detective."

Wells disappeared down the hall as Nick stuck his head into the hospital room. "How ya doing, Schank?"

"Mmmm-mmmm!" Schanke gestured wildly with a bandaged hand as he worked to clear his mouth. "You should have seen the joke I just pulled on Windbag Wells!"

"Hush, Don." Myra Schanke patted her husband's stomach. "Gloating upsets digestion. Nick, I brought some lovely chocolate cake for Don, but there's lots. Couldn't I tempt you out of your diet just once?"

"Sorry, Myra, but thanks. I really did come to see how Don was."

"I'll be back on duty as soon as I can cuff a crook. I think Stonetree is just about ready to tell Wells to stick his psychiatric evaluations up his..."

"Language, Don!"

"... nose. Sorry, plumcake."

Nick smiled. "Well, you'll be happy to know that Sister is going to be pleading guilty."

"That's good." Schanke shifted uncomfortably. "I still kind of wish I could remember those few days."

"Schank, believe me— you don't want to remember."

"I don't know. I feel like there's something really big I should know but..." He frowned. "I did something *really* embarrassing and nobody wants to tell me about it. That's it, isn't it?"

"More embarrassing than thinking you're a vampire?" He slapped his partner's leg and stood up. "Listen, I can't stay long. I have to get to work. Sleep good tonight – we want you back soon. The doughnuts are getting stale before we can finish them."

"Ha!" snarled Schanke, but he chuckled. "Thanks. Thanks for looking after me, Nick."

"No problem."

He stepped out into the hall but Schanke's voice carried after him. "You wanna know the part that's even funnier than me thinking I was a vampire? Me thinking YOU were a vampire!"

* * *

"What a vile little man!" sniffed Janette as she looked down at Tom's body. Even weakened by the garlic he had carried, Janette had been more than strong enough to snatch up a letter opener and plunge it through Tom's heart. "I suppose we'll have to have someone in to remove the body."

"Have them take that *away as well." Nick nodded towards the edge of a piece of wood sticking out from under the chesterfield. Tom's cross had skittered most, but not quite all, of the way underneath when he had thrown it away. Janette grimaced.*

"Nicolah! That was my favourite piece of furniture! We won't be able to use it until that thing is gone!"

"Better that we can't enjoy a chesterfield than that we can't enjoy anything at all. We're still alive, Janette."

"I suppose I should say 'thank you', Nicolah." She reached for his hands but he pulled them out of her grasp with a yelp. "Oh. I'm sorry! I forgot."

Raw, red blisters were already forming on Nick's palms where he had held the cross. "They'll heal."

Janette took one of his hands gently and examined it. "They are not serious, I think." She bent her neck and kissed his palm. He winced in agony and she gave him a cruel smile. "Ah, Nicolah! And the amusing part of it all is that he actually thought you *were human!"*

— The End —

Sleep of the Undead; or, No Rest for the Wicked

by Pamela Rush

What dreams may come to a sleeping vampire bombarded by video signals? LaCroix finds out in this light-hearted story.

"Satire is death, but parody is life." — Vladimir Nabokov

Prologue

LaCroix settled with a sigh that expelled the little air left in his lungs. He would not need it for a while: he needed rest—the deep rest that would heal these plaguey wounds inflicted by that ungrateful cub, Nicholas... Nicholas, who doubtlessly believed him dead and disintegrated. The young fool still had much to learn and LaCroix would enjoy teaching him! But first, rest; regain his full strength. It was past full daylight now although fortunately overcast; he had sought out shelter just in time. He was vaguely aware of human voices and human thoughts outside his cozy retreat; it made his fangs itch, but it was the wrong time to hunt. The meal he had made of that woman in Nicholas' loft would suffice him for some time and he desperately needed the long, deep sleep...

* * *

"I'm still reading a leaking signal here someplace on this corner. It must be inside one of these old houses. We checked every inch of the line and drops out here yesterday."

"No one up the line from this house has complained; somebody would've called us if their Monday night football was fuzzy. Boy, look at the junk mail piled up. People oughtta take care of that when they go away; it's an invitation for a break in."

"I dunno. Looks more like the place is abandoned than closed up. Look, let's knock on a couple a doors in that direction and check for radiating signals. If we don't find anything back to the corner, we'll call it quits."

* * *

The voices faded; the dark was cool; oblivion was sweet.

Scene I

The voices faded in and out, flickering, half intelligible. Annoying.

"Your mission, should... oose to accept it..."

"...the city, Los Angeles....wear a badge. My name is..."

"Say good night, Gracie."

"Four to beam up, Scotty."

"Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk."

Very, very annoying. And much more insistent. LaCroix was aware that he had been listening to the voices for a very long time before he became irritated enough to open his eyes. Somebody would regret this disturbance.

* * *

His eyelids flickered, opened above blazing golden orbs. Strange. LaCroix did not remember the sun setting nor arising and coming to... to this place. Wherever it might be. He must be very, very fatigued indeed; he had never heard of the undead sleepwalking but perhaps... Even stranger: was his night vision affected, too? Or was the moonlight so marvelously bright that shadows and silhouettes appeared blacker still so that the flat landscape, broken only by rocky projections and stunted brush, was outlined in chiaroscuro? Even to his specialized night vision, it looked as thought all the colour had been leached out of the world.

The moonlight reflected from something large and white moving rapidly towards his location. Suddenly, he scented human blood, heard the pounding of a human pulse... no, two of them. Along with some larger, clumsier mammals. His fangs flashed in the lambent light. He was not particularly hungry; but, however he had come here, it had been many years since he had brought down a horseman in full flight. It would be piquant.

The animals slowed as they approached him, the riders evidently finding him as visible in the bright, bluish moonlight as they were to his night vision. One of the horse was spotted, dark and light; the rider was dark— dark hair; dark skin; dark, close-fitting clothes. The other horse, the one that had first caught his attention, was milk-white; the rider, as if for some improbable circus performance, was also in white except for a narrow black mask across his eyes. Skullduggery? If these puny mortals were up to no good, the world would certainly be well rid of them soon. LaCroix growled and rose a meter above the ground, throwing his arms wide: that should throw a fright into the dumb animals. Probably affright the horses, too.

The masked man drew up sharply, the big white horse dancing sideways. The dark man on the paint horse came to a collected halt slightly behind the other. The masked man drew an old-fashioned, double-action .38 revolver from a hip holster and pointed it at LaCroix. LaCroix's growl slid into a nasty laugh. He would allow them a shot or two; they would die amazed.

"I don't know how you do that, stranger, but you're scarin' the horses. I'll have to ask you to stop flyin' 'round like that. I can't say that it's against the law in Texas, but it is surely contrary to the law of nature."

LaCroix swooped faster than a human eye could follow; unexpectedly, the masked man's sidearm seemed to track him of its own volition, faster than a human eye could follow. Fire exploded from the barrel once, twice. LaCroix felt the mild sting of the bullet in his shoulder, then a burning sensation. He fell back, suddenly sickened. It was... silver... the damned bullet was silver! LaCroix doubled over, staggered a step, another step. He must get away from this fool mortal with the fatal silver bullets.

"Hhhmmm. Him seem hurt bad, Kemosabe."

"No, Tonto. I just winged him. That's the cowboy way. I'm sure he will recover."

LaCroix felt himself growing faint. How humiliating! "Who... who was that masked man?" he whispered as consciousness faded...

Scene II

The voices would not leave him in peace. They flickered, irritatingly, at the edge of his understanding.

"One of these days, Alice, one of these days... Pow! Right in the kisser!"

"I do not drink...wine."

No, of course not. Only drink wine mixed with... mixed with...

"He was brought across in twelve twenty–eight."

Something familiar and comforting about that voice...

"Hello, I'm Mister Ed!"

No, no, no... No horses. Horses meant trouble for LaCroix.

He must be dreaming. LaCroix realized that he must be dreaming yet he could not wake. *I will make the effort and I will awake,* he thought. *I will do it now!*

* * *

LaCroix opened his eyes and surveyed the scene; for some reason, the overture to *William Tell* was running through his mind although he had never liked it. Too melodramatic, too sentimental. He must exercise a modicum of caution this time because... he could not recall precisely, but there was a definite feeling that he must take care.

"...*petites pois et les petites choux*. It's a little joke, you see. Because the *petites choux*, the puff pastries we would say, look like little cabbages and then we..."

LaCroix flinched; of all the voices that plagued him, he was quite certain that this was the most irritating of all: high-pitched, nasal, flat and droning on and on and on and on about human food. Why should they bother to create aesthetically pleasing food? The only object to their feeding was to produce blood.

Bright lights blazed in his eyes, almost blinding him; it was like daylight, yet obviously not true sunlight or he would have been charcoal by now. There had been no colour and only strange, blue-tinted light... someplace he had been recently. There was far too much light and too many bright colours here. Slowly, he became accustomed to the glare and identified the source of the endlessly droning voice.

A tall woman, as tall as LaCroix: indifferent looks, indifferently dressed, but her strong sense of self, of single-minded purpose, reverberated in LaCroix's mind. She was wrapped in a voluminous canvas apron, standing with her back to him, busily fussing over mounds of raw, human food and apparently talking to herself as she did. LaCroix felt disoriented and angry; and when he felt angry, there was really only one thing that was going to make him feel better.

LaCroix approached her silently. He knew he must be careful, but she was not armed and not yet aware of his presence; she could not possibly pose a threat to him. Almost within arm's length, LaCroix froze suddenly. What was that incredible...?

"The secret," she was saying, "is to chop the garlic very, very fine so that all the juices are released." A wave of her hand sent a towel and fine bits of garlic flying. LaCroix ducked. She shoved the odorous mess in front of her into a stockpot and wiped her hands vigorously on her apron. "Now, Jerry, do you have my capon ready? Jerry? Oh, there you are. But where is my capon, dear boy?"

She had turned, stared straight at LaCroix and brandished a huge poultry skewer at him: a silver plated skewer in the shape of an elongated cross! "We can't do *Salpicon de capon* without the capon. Where are you going? Well, see whether you can find it, dear, and we'll just finish the soup meanwhile."

As she turned back to her work space, apparently still unaware that he was not Jerry-the-capon-fetcher, LaCroix arose slowly from his bolthole behind a storage cabinet and warily stalked his prey once more.

"Now, you see, this is the very best method I've found for browning the cheese on top of French onion soup."

An ominous hissing— followed by a muted roar.

"It works very well for meringues, too. Dries them out completely. Nothing worse than soggy meringues."

LaCroix grabbed her shoulders, spun the tall woman to meet her doom... and shrieked as she came fully about pointing a flaming acetylene torch at his chest. He threw himself backwards, beating at flaming cloth. The climbing flames, the pungent smoke, the blazing lights, the flat voice droning on and on and on, "...oh, my, kitchen accidents can be serious, of course, so you should always know the location of your chemical fire extinguisher..."

Mercifully, LaCroix lost consciousness.

Scene III

LaCroix realized now that the voices were not real. They could not be real. Nevertheless, they were aggravating.

"I love it when a plan comes together."

"I...I coulda been a contender!"

"Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit outta my hat!"

"Mrs. Peel, we're needed..."

"Klaatu barada nikto, Gort."

"You're travelling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of the mind..."

Tell me about it, thought LaCroix, uncharacteristically employing the vernacular.

* * *

When LaCroix opened his eyes this time, he thought for a moment that he had dreamed that he opened them because he still saw only swirling, shapeless, grey currents. Sound seemed strangely muffled and distant, too. Even his paranormal senses were dulled by the density of the thick, damp, grey air. Surely this peasouper could occur only in one place in all the world. LaCroix felt some of his usual self-confidence returning; at least he was back in a world he recognized.

The first thing to do would be to verify his location; he moved swiftly towards a dim, distant pool of light. The streetlamp was not very bright even close to, but it revealed the plaque set into the curb: Paddington Court. LaCroix knew it: a cul-de-sac between Paddington Street and Marlyebone Road, not far from Paddington Station. A sound, muffled by the fog, but surely a mortal heartbeat; one man, or possibly two, coming towards him from the open end of the street. LaCroix turned towards the promise of fresh blood and looked directly at the streetlamp for the first time. It was a gaslight.

A man appeared suddenly as figures do out of such a fog. Tall; slender; narrow face with a long, narrow, high-bridged nose and bright, inquisitive eyes. A long coat flapped about his legs and he wore a quite-peculiar looking hat. He skirted what appeared to be a boarded up kiosk inconveniently situated on the street corner and approached LaCroix without hesitation.

"Excuse me, sir. Have you seen a young woman about here? I was supposed to have met her earlier, but I've been delayed."

Something in the back of LaCroix's mind reminded him to be very, very cautious. Lately, his life had developed a bizarre way of turning unexpectedly nasty.

"I have seen no one save yourself in the past few minutes here. But you alarm me. A young woman should not be out alone on such a night. I daresay that even a gentleman such as yourself would venture out armed against cutthroats?"

The stranger cast a quizzical glance at LaCroix but answered readily enough, "No, I prefer to use logic rather than brute force in dealing with whatever problems may arise."

"No sidearms, then? No revolver, no small sword, no stiletto, no silver paperknife? No skewers? No flamethrowers on you? Any garlic butter?"

The stranger looked puzzled but patted his capacious coat pockets obligingly. "No, I only seem to have this bag of..."

LaCroix's eyes glowed and his fangs descended with a pop; a growl started at the back of his throat.

"Why, how very interesting! How very improbable! But I cannot argue against the evidence! Tell me, can you speak with your... hhhmmm... teeth.. .in that position? Do you ever bite yourself accidently? It looks as thought the clearance is too..."

LaCroix placed a clawed hand on each shoulder of the stranger and shook him a little, just to make him be quiet. The man smiled, a charming, lopsided and rather mad smile and said, "Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. You'll regret it, you know."

LaCroix's harsh laughter was silenced as his fangs touched skin, broke skin; he tasted the first delicious drop of blood and sucked greedily... and... choked... gagged... gasped... It was not blood, or not human at any rate; it was not... human... blood!

"Poison," LaCroix choked out. "Damn you, you've poisoned me! You're not human!"

"Well, no. I told you that you would regret it! No one ever listens to me; sometimes I don't know why I bother. For instance, just the other day I was telling...."

"Will you shut up!" LaCroix clutched his burning throat; he was nauseated and dizzy. He gasped out, "What have you done to me? Who... who are you?"

"Precisely," came the answer.

LaCroix was still puzzling over it when he lost consciousness.

* * *

A sturdy, fair girl in a pink-and-white striped, bibbed overall leaned out of the boxy blue structure on the street corner behind the oddly dressed man who was still gazing at the spot from which LaCroix had disappeared, absent-mindedly eating jellybabies from a small and rather sticky paper bag.

"Did that man just disappear into thin air?" she asked. "Is he, well, you know...?"

The stranger stuffed the empty bag back into a pocket, rubbed his neck thoughtfully and wrapped the long, many-coloured scarf trailing behind him rather tightly twice around his neck. "I was looking for you, Sarah Jane! No, I'm certain he's not a Time Lord. Not at all. But a traveller, like ourselves, nevertheless. Poor chap. I fear that he is lost. Really lost. Lost in time... and... lost... in space."

— The End —

A Thirst for Vengeance

a round-robin story by the members of FKFIC–L

The following is a Forever Knight "round robin" story. Now wait! before you toss the zine aside in disgust— this one works! Really! I'm not saying this just because I'm the editor; it's very well done, everything hangs together extremely well, there were remarkably few disputes about what direction the story line should follow— and there's a REAL PLOT! I've participated in round–robin stories in the past, and this is by far the most interesting and well–written.

Title is by Karin Welss. Roland d'Agincourt appears by permission of Marian Huntsman Gibbons. Valerie Meachum started us out...

Part 1

Valerie Lynn Meachum

The ringing of her desk phone jarred Natalie's attention out of the report she was working on, not that it had all that much of her attention to begin with. "Forensics."

"Hey, Nat, it's Schanke. Heard anything?"

"Not a peep. You?"

"Nope. And Stonetree's about to have a meltdown."

"He's not the only one."

"I know. Listen, he'll turn up. He always does."

"I hope so. Call the *second* you hear anything, okay?"

"You got it. Catch you later."

"Bye."

Schanke was good at sounding nonchalant, but she knew he was every bit as worried about his partner as she was. "Dammit, Nick," she muttered, "I thought you weren't going to pull this disappearing act stuff any more."

Three days without any sort of trace; he'd never done that before, and more and more she was afraid this time it wasn't his idea. Her worried imagination conjured up an image of Nick caught in the daylight somehow, and immediately she banished it. Surely if that were the case they would have heard something from...

That was it! Not necessarily the answer, but something to make her feel a little less like she was sitting around doing nothing. Shrugging out of her lab coat, she grabbed her jacket and quickly locked up.

Part 2

Valerie Lynn Meachum

"*Bonsoir,* Natalie." If Janette was surprised, she showed no sign. "What brings you here? It doesn't seem to be your element."

"No kidding. Have you seen Nick?"

The vampire woman frowned. "He hasn't been here in several days, but that's nothing unusual. Why?"

"Because we haven't seen him in three days, and that *is*."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Schanke, me, the precinct. Nobody ... or at least nobody mortal," she corrected herself. "It just occurred to me to ask you."

Janette shook her head. "No, you're right. Nobody. I thought nothing of it, but it isn't like him to neglect his precious job."

"No, it isn't." Natalie had hoped this would produce some sort of encouraging word, but now she was getting even more nervous. "And usually when he gets frustrated with it he comes here."

Part 3

Julia E. Linthicum

Janette replied, shaking her dark head, "I haven't seen him, Natalie. Have you tried his apartment?"

"That was the first place we tried," Natalie said. "When I call the place, all I get is the blasted answering machine. His car is gone, too."

"Hard to miss *that*, even in broad daylight."

Natalie allowed herself a wan smile. "Where would he go? Did he mention anything that was bothering him?"

Janette considered the question thoughtfully, "Now that you mention it, Nicholas had been very quiet recently, almost reluctant to talk about his work." She remembered the last time she had spoken with Nicholas. He had been moody, even sullen, but she couldn't get anything out of him.

"But he wasn't working on anything important when he disappeared," Natalie said. "He and Schanke had finished up that murder case almost a week before he dropped out of sight."

Janette asked, "What murder case? Who was involved?" She added coolly, "At this point, anything might prove useful in our hunt."

Part 4

Karin Welss

Nat sighed as she left The Raven and drove back to the precinct.

Damn you, Nick, she thought. *You've turned my life upside down. I've lied and covered up for you, and even put myself in danger because of you, and now you've disappeared again. No word, no phone call. Nothing.*

The frightening thought that he might have left permanently crossed her mind. What if he had decided that it was "time to move on"?

He wouldn't do that, she tried to quash the thought. *He promised he'd try to get in touch with me if that ever became necessary.*

Nevertheless, she found herself making a U-turn, and heading towards Nick's apartment instead of back to the precinct. There were things at Nick's place that he would never leave behind voluntarily. She needed to see them, and reassure herself that he hadn't abandoned her, hadn't "moved on" to a new life, and a new identity elsewhere.

As she pulled up to the old warehouse that housed his apartment, she peeked into his garage, hoping to see an old Caddy parked there.

Nothing. She blinked through the haze of dust and cobwebs covering the small, dirty windowpane, and looked again into the garage's dark depths, somehow hoping against hope that a shiny green monstrosity of a car would magically appear out of the shadows.

Then, feeling a cold lump of dread in her stomach, she punched the entrance code, and let herself into Nick's apartment.

Sliding back the heavy door to the freight elevator, she knew immediately that he wasn't home.

The apartment felt abandoned to her. Nick's special lightproof shutters for the windows and skylight were retracted, and sunlight poured into the large living area, giving the room an entirely different feel.

Feeling jumpy and nervous, as if she were a burglar, she went upstairs to his bedroom. In the back of his closet, behind the many pairs of neatly pressed trousers and silk shirts, she found what she was looking for: a large, battered leather portmanteau.

Natalie lugged the case onto the unmade sheets of his bed— black cotton instead of silk for a change— and opened it. Everything was still there— the meager precious artifacts of his past life: a flat wooden case that contained a cross given to him by Joan of Arc; a slender polished nameplate from a professor's desk; a bundle of yellowed, tattered–looking letters tied with a faded and stained silk ribbon; a uniform cap, trimmed with tarnished gold braid, of Civil War vintage; and a number of other items Natalie did not recognize. Feeling more uncomfortable than ever with her prying, she closed the portmanteau and put it back in the closet.

As Natalie walked slowly back downstairs, she wasn't sure if she was more relieved or worried at the fact that the portmanteau was still there. At least he hadn't left voluntarily...

Time to play detective in the rest of his apartment. At least her forensics training had equipped her to notice small details. She paced slowly around the apartment, noting the dried residues of paint on the paintbrushes on his work table in one corner; the dust lying thickly on his piano; the scattered books and magazines lying exactly in the same places as when she had been here looking for him three days ago.

She sighed again, and went into the kitchen. There were still several empty bottles in his trash can, complete with a suspicious brown residue dried to their bottoms.

Careless, thought Natalie, disapprovingly. Internal Affairs would have fun with his kitchen if and when they were called in to investigate Nick's disappearance.

Now for the final test, she thought, and opened his refrigerator. Grimacing, she lifted one of the bottles to the light.

"Clotted. Definitely clotted," she remarked to herself, giving the wine bottle a gentle swirl.

"So you haven't been home for dinner, either," Natalie said out loud, because now she was *really* worried. "Bad boy. Where the hell are you, Nick?"

Janette's advice came back to mind. She walked back into the living room, and dialed Schanke's extension at the precinct.

"Metro Police— Detective Schanke speaking."

"It's Nat," she said. "I'm at Nick's place. Still nothing— I drove over to The Raven on my break, and Nick's friend Janette hadn't heard from him, either."

"Oh boy..." Schanke's voice trailed off, and Nat imagined him rubbing his eyes in frustration. "This doesn't look good. What do I tell Stonetree?"

"I don't know," replied Nat. "Don't tell him anything for now. I'm going to poke around here for a while, see if I can find anything. Janette did mention that she thought something about that last case was bothering Nick. Maybe you can go back over the paperwork and see if anything about the case was, well, *strange?*"

"Yeah, sure, I'll do that," said Schanke. "You let me know if you come up with anything there, okay?"

"You got it," said Nat. "Bye."

As Nat put down the receiver, she noticed that Nick's answering machine was flashing. The digital readout indicated five messages. She knew at least two were from her, and one from Schanke. Nick was normally obsessive about dialing in and retrieving his messages. The fact that he hadn't was significant.

Nat hesitated; this was a bigger breach of Nick's privacy than rummaging through his closet. Then she reached out and pressed the PLAYBACK button on the answering machine.

The first message: a man's voice speaking rapidly in French. This could be important. Nat hit MEMO, and decided to return to it when she had heard the rest of the messages on the machine.

Two messages from her. Nat grimaced— she hated the sound of her own voice.

One message from Schanke. "Hey partner, check in, willya?"

One message from an auto-parts dealer regarding something Nick had ordered for the Caddy.

Nat hit REWIND, and listened to the first message again. And again. Her French was adequate but scarcely fluent, and the man was speaking in a dialect strange to her. Finally she puzzled out the gist of it.

"Cousin Nicki... Roland here. I've heard a rumor that our old friend is back in town, and most unhappy. Please get in touch with me, hmmmm? I'm currently in Montreal, at the old house. You know where..."

Part 5

Barbara Reid

"No, Schanke, I appreciate the invitation, but I can't talk now, I'm busy." Natalie brushed past the eager sounding police detective to hurry to her desk in the common room. She tossed a few folders around, thinking, thinking. "Oh darn," she breathed.

She walked back to the detective office area, hesitated, then knocked on a door. "Come in." She entered, smiled, perched on the edge of a desk.

"I'm acceptable company again?" said Schanke. "Why is it you never want to hear about the parties Myra throws?"

She blinked; she'd known she would have to answer this. "I can't believe with Nick missing that you've got your mind on a *party*!"

"Hey, I'm human, too, and Myra's been planning this for weeks. Besides, Nick's a weird guy but he always shows up." Schanke shrugged again. "Okay, I'm worried, but hey, he's a big boy. Isn't like he was born yesterday."

Okay, Schanke, he certainly wasn't, Natalie thought, *I'll grant you that.* She absently kicked a toe against Schanke's desk. Should she or shouldn't she tell him about the telephone messages on the machine at Nick's place? Maybe later, but first she'd get what she'd come in for.

"Hum, yeah, guess you're right. But I've been thinking..."

"Always a dangerous task"

Yeah, for you! "...and I'd like to look over that file again. The one from last week. The last murder case you and Nick worked on."

"You mean the last one we closed. We're always working on a lot of unsolved cases, whether or not the rest of the staff hears about it." He shifed papers on his desk. "It's right on top here, right on top. Everyone keeps asking about it, so I had it out." He handed her the papers.

She took it, gave him a small smile. "I'll bring it back in an hour, then. I don't need it long." She paused. "Tell me later about the party, okay? You and Myra are dears to think of me."

He nodded, but her mood had caught him, too, and he didn't smile.

Back at her desk, Dr. Lambert picked up the phone as she opened the folder. The number rang and a woman answered. "Yes, it's me, Natalie. I have the information I mentioned before." She listened to an answer. "This is the case from a week ago. Lots of people have already been interviewed about this, so if anyone asks, say that Nick talked with you about it. I wasn't involved at the time, it being a day off for me. Yes, you're right, they are few and far between."

She continued, "Nick was looking for the murderer of a street person, a homeless man. One wanted for child abduction. Luckily, they were able to find the child with him." She listened. "Yes, the child said he had been abducted. He couldn't give us names and dates, and the department couldn't trace him, so the report says that he's been placed with an agency."

Natalie paused, then said, "Nick was very startled by the case. I remember he came and talked to me, about social cases I'd seen and what agencies were available that could take in a child." But he wasn't that young, she remembered. "I didn't think he'd done anything more, the child welfare department was in charge after that. It was their area.

"The man? The boy didn't know his name. And, no, I didn't see the body. I could call whoever was on that night, though." She read the papers in front of her. "The boy? Janette, I don't know if you can help with this, but his name was Daniel." There was a long pause on the other end, Natalie noted, then after formalities and thank you's the owner of the nightclub rang off.

Funny, thought Natalie, gnawing a fingernail. That was almost like talking to Nick about this case. He'd asked for information, then clammed up about it. She thought again about the car missing from the warehouse building, the dried paint on the brushes. *And did you take some of those bottles with you? Or didn't you have a chance to?*

Part 6

Karin Welss

Hmmmmmm.... Natalie continued to chew thoughtfully on her fingernail as she considered the evidence. An old friend, eh? Well, her association with Nick had certainly taught her the meaning of *that* term....

Speaking of old friends....

"Oh, bloody hell, I knew I forgot something," Nat exclaimed to herself, as she grabbed for the phone.

She punched the REDIAL button on the phone. Two rings, three, four...

"Come on, Janette. You were there just a minute ago..." Nat hissed, then smiled in relief as the phone was picked up.

"*Oui, bon soir.* This is Janette...."

"Janette, it's Nat again. Look, I need some information, and I think it's important. Do you know Nick's cousin Roland?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Janette replied coldly. "Why? What has he done? *Merde*, I should have known that *he'd* be mixed up in this..."

Nat took a deep breath, and gauged how much she should tell Janette. Nick was probably going to be annoyed when he found out that she'd been snooping around his apartment.

"Look, I forgot to tell you that I went to Nick's place after I left the Raven this afternoon. I, um, needed to check on something. Anyhow, when I got there, Roland had, um, left this message for Nick, but I don't think that he actually managed to get hold of him. I need to get hold of Roland— can you help me?"

There was a pause on the line as Janette digested the news. "Roland, hmmmmm. Did he make any mention of where he was?"

Natalie grinned in relief. Janette sounded as if she were going to cooperate. "He said that he was in Montreal, at the old house, and that Nick would know where that was..."

"Ah, yes, I know exactly what he means. Just one moment, I'll look up the number for you, Dr. Lambert. Not that I thought I'd ever give it out to a *mortal*."

Janette still sounded disgusted, but Natalie didn't care as she hastily scribbled down the phone number on a scrap of paper.

"Thank you, Janette," she said sincerely.

"Hmmm, well, Nicolas trusts you, suppose I must, too. And be careful of Roland, hmmmmm?"

"Not to worry," Natalie said cheerfully. "We've met, and he owes me a favor. You know what I'm talking about..."

"Indeed," said Janette. "But I would still be careful, if I were you."

"I will," Nat promised, and hung up. She looked at the phone, shaking her head incredulously. Who would have thought that she'd be mixed up with not one, but *three* vampires, one of whom was Nick's old lover, and the other his cousin?

She looked at the phone number Janette had given her, and reached for the phone again. Oh, yes, Roland owed her a *very* large favor.

The phone was off the hook before the first ring had even completed.

"Hello, Roland? Dr. Natalie Lambert here... Nick's friend. Do you know where he is?"

Part 7

by Jennise E. Hall

INT. MORGUE/NAT'S DESK – LATE AFTERNOON

Nat stands in the dim light talking on the phone.

NATALIE: Yes. All right. I'll wait until 8. Bye.

INT. FOYER – NIGHT

Roland, about 6 feet tall, dirty blond hair, answers a loud chiming doorbell to Nat.

ROLAND: Dr. Natalie. You made good time. Come in.

Natalie steps past him into the large foyer. She studies the room carefully, her eyes resting on the mirror for a moment.

ROLAND: Forgive me for taking so long to get the door. I just got back.

She takes another look at his face finally registering the pinkishness in his complexion.

NATALIE: Is he here?

Draping his arm across her shoulders he sweeps her into the next room.

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

The room is a pleasing mixture of modern and classic styles.

ROLAND: Now Doc Nat, I told you on the phone Nikki never returned my message. You didn't need to drive all the way out here.

He sits her in a large comfortable chair and heads for the well-stocked bar.

ROLAND: Can I get you something?

Natalie studies the bar carefully.

NATALIE: No uh...wine?

ROLAND (*smiling*): That horrible stuff Janette drinks. Scotch?

NATALIE: Nick never got your message.

Natalie does not miss the brief flash of concern that passes over Roland's face.

ROLAND: You're sure?

NATALIE: It was still on the machine. Who is the 'friend' you were talking about?

ROLAND: Well at least I know my dear cousin didn't "blow me off."

NATALIE: Who were you trying to warn him about?

Roland doesn't answer.

NATALIE: Come on, Roland. Nick's in trouble. Tell what's going on. Please.

Roland studies Natalie so intently that she's obviously nervous, but her eyes never leave his.

ROLAND: LaCroix's back. Nikki isn't high on his list.

NATALIE (*under her breath*): That's not possible.

ROLAND: I'm not possible either. (*beat*) Why don't you head back to Toronto? I'll find Nikki. (*raising his hand as if pledging an oath*) I promise to have him call you.

NATALIE: Who's Daniel?

Roland tries to usher Natalie toward the door.

ROLAND: Never heard of him.

She dashes away from him and to the other side of the sofa. A second later Roland is standing beside her.

NATALIE: I think this Daniel has something to do with why Nick disappeared. And if LaCroix's in town Nick needs to know right away.

ROLAND: Exactly. Now... (*trying to hypnotize her*) You want to drive back to Toronto...

Part 8

Karin Welss

Natalie couldn't believe his nerve! Angry, worried to death about Nick, this was the final straw. Without thinking, she drew back her hand and slapped him across the face.

"Don't you dare try playing your little vampire mind games with me," she hissed. "It doesn't work, and you're not getting rid of me so easily. It's a long drive back to Toronto, and I'm not leaving until you tell me where I can find Nick!"

Roland blinked, surprised. Of course, she couldn't hurt him, but she had startled him. Normally sure-footed when it came to dealing with women, Natalie's reaction had taken him aback. He opened his mouth, shut it again, and recalculated his strategy.

Trust Nicki to associate with the one mortal who couldn't be coerced, he thought, wearily. His cousin had always done things the hard way, even while they were both still mortal.

"My dear Doctor Lambert, I do apologize," he said, his voice as smooth and sweet as honey. "I wouldn't have done that, except that I'm concerned for you. For you, and Nicki, both. You see, my cousin's... affection... for you puts you in danger as well. Believe me, I was trying to send you away for your own protection."

He handed Natalie a glass of Scotch and soda. She automatically took a sip, wrinkled her nose in distaste, and placed the glass on a small table next to her.

"So Nick *is* in Montreal. And LaCroix, too?" She leaned forward and pinned Roland with her best Medical Examiner look.

Roland sighed, shrugged, and spread his hands wide. "LaCroix is, and I believe Daniel, too. And I fear Nick has been lured here... it's a long story."

Nat stood up, briskly. "Well, let's get to work. We've got to find Nick, before LaCroix does."

Roland ran a weary hand through his hair, and stood gazing down at her. Nat's heart jumped a beat as she noticed how similar his eyes and mouth were to Nick's. And that smile... she tore her thoughts away from a certain Toronto homicide detective as Roland began to speak.

"Well, since I have failed to convince you of the danger you're in, and since you are determined to pursue this foolhardy course of action, I have no choice but to accompany you, Doctor Lambert. May I call you Natalie?"

He caught her hand and kissed it gallantly. Nat found her lips quirking in a smile despite herself.

"Well, Nick warned me you were a ladies' man," she said dryly. "So you'll help me try to find him?"

Roland nodded. "Nicki would never, ever forgive me if I allowed any harm to come to you. You are, shall we say, very special to him?"

Part 9

Valerie Meachum

Janette watched the midnight revelers on the Raven's dance floor, not really seeing them. What had he gotten himself into this time?

But the fear continued to nag at her that he *hadn't* gotten himself into it, that whatever the trouble was had come looking for him. Tempted though she might be to tell herself he was a big boy and could take care of himself, that wasn't true and never had been. She had pulled him from the claws of fate enough times to know that.

That, she knew, was one of the reasons he was never quite suited to be one of them: he could never survive alone, whether that survival was practical or emotional. She and LaCroix had never been enough for him, and she alone certainly was not. She did not begrudge him his many involvements, though, for the circle always found its way back to her. She could be content with that.

Not that she had a choice, of course. If she were to try to sever his other relationships out of jealousy— Natalie, for example— she would only drive him away, and in a case like that he might just not come back. She couldn't really imagine that, but neither did she want to test it. No, she could tolerate the others; many she even liked, making fast friends of them as she had with poor Erica. Even Natalie, her current not-really-rival, was quite interesting for a mortal. In fact, she had ceased some time ago to lump the coroner in with the amorphous mass of "them" all around her; not "them," though certainly not "Us." Natalie was a mass of contradictions, the exception to a great many rules, and Janette found herself promoting that as much as Nick did.

Of course, no matter what his protests, Janette knew that if faced with losing his special confidante, Nicholas would never be able to let her go. And lose her he would, sooner or later, unless he prevented it. Then Natalie *would* be "Us," and the dilemma would be solved. Alternatively, her time might come and go as it did for all mortals, and again the dilemma would be solved— though Janette admitted to herself that it would be a waste. But either way, she had only to ignore the dichotomy and it would go away.

What would not go away on its own was the present, more pressing problem of Nick's disappearance. With a slight frisson she recalled her words to him a few short weeks before: "We are both still the children of LaCroix. And the threads of that connection have been vibrating lately..."

They had both thought the distasteful Lucy Preston business had been the explanation of that, and the tension had been somewhat dispelled by his telling her at last of their master's deceitful trap for which the unfortunate little ballerina of long ago had been the bait. Now, though, the strings were wound tighter than ever, and...

"That's not possible," she told herself firmly, but even as she said it she knew it was. LaCroix had vanished many times over the centuries, always returning to taunt his children that they could not survive without him. And even though it had been months this time, months of certainty in their freedom, always that little sliver of doubt had made her hesitate in her choices. She was her own mistress now, yet she could not help looking over her shoulder, half-expecting to find him there with the disapproving scowl that had been the terror of her existence for centuries.

She had warned Natalie to be careful of Roland— though the admonition had fallen on deaf ears; the woman was so stubborn!— because the exasperating charmer was a hazard to any woman, particularly a pretty one, and she didn't quite trust him to honor his cousin's prior claim in the face of temptation. But if LaCroix really had returned the danger was no longer amusing, for Roland's hatred of the elder vampire would not prevent LaCroix from using him for his own ends. Always the master manipulator, he had never failed to stay a step ahead of them all throughout the centuries.

And Natalie, a single mortal with no knowledge at all of what she was facing, had entered this arena of lies alone.

Part 10

Sharon S. Scott

He awoke slowly to the cold and the dark. He was disoriented, his senses dulled. He heard whimpers and soft cries coming from somewhere near him. He realized as he sat up that his body ached. He was bruised and sore and very cold. He had been lying on cold, unforgiving stone. Where was he? Why was he here? He sat quietly for a few moments, hugging his arms to his chest, trying to remember what had brought him to this place. His mind was cloudy, and he found only foggy memories of a woman's face, a woman's voice, and the soft touch of her hand on his cheek. And with those memories came a desire to be near her, to touch her gently and murmur her name, to hold her in his arms. He ached with the need. Who was she? And why was she his only memory?

Part 11

Janet[te] Dornhoff

Nick shook his head, trying to collect his scattered thoughts. The room was dark, mercifully dark. Normal light would have been unbearable just now. The floor beneath him was stone, but there was a small bed against one wall. The door was heavy and metallic. What little light there was came in through a small window near the top of the door. A barred window.

Nick sat up quickly, ignoring the remaining dizziness. He was obviously a prisoner. It was starting to come back to him, but only in bits and pieces. He'd been painting, left the machine on. Someone had called. Roland. Nick hadn't bothered to pick it up, more out of surprise from hearing Roland's voice than anything else. And... and hearing that LaCroix might be back, might have survived. That he was "unhappy" was no surprise.

Why didn't I call him back? Nick thought. Something else... something else already bothering him...

Nick stood up, carefully. He was weak, dizzy. Hungry. How long had it been? He'd had about half a bottle before starting to paint. What had happened since? He leaned a bit against the door as he looked out through the bars.

There was a hallway leading off to the right, with another door across the hall and further down. To the left, the hallway ended as one side opened out into a large room. Nick couldn't see very much, a couch and a table, what might be a TV or stereo. The edge of a skylight. There were heavy shutters to either side, but right now it was open. The dim lighting came from there, moonlight or starlight. Not having spent much time with LaCroix lately, Nick couldn't tell if it was his sort of place or not.

He tested the door, first gently, then with as much strength as he could. Even if he weren't weakened and hungry, it was far more than any mortal could bring to bear. The only result was a slight indentation in the outer metal. The bars left not even that much sign of his efforts. Nick even tried the walls, but they were heavy stone.

There'd been no windows on any of the walls he could see; perhaps this place was underground. Nice and light–proof, but harder to get out of in a hurry. It felt closed–in. Nick always preferred to be up in the air, with lots of windows opened to the cityscape. There was no way out of here, no sign of anyone else, human or otherwise. Had there been sounds, earlier, or had he imagined it? How long would it be before whoever it was came back? *Would* they come back?

Nick felt a surge of panic, followed by the even more dangerous *need* lurking below the surface. It had been days. There was an edge to the hunger, a sharp edge he hadn't felt in a long time. No longer desire, but survival. The cold wasn't just the room temperature, it was inside of him. Just as regular feeding, or sometimes Natalie's potions, put color in his cheeks and warmth in his hands, now the need was draining that semblance of life away. The last time it had gone this far was when he'd woken up in the morgue. The night he'd first met Natalie.

Natalie. So unafraid, so certain that he was human, or could be human, that he was worth all the time and trouble she put into saving him from himself. If only she were here now, near him. She'd offer him one of her chemical brews and tell him that going without for so long was a good thing, that at least it brought him closer. Natalie. So human, so alive, so bright and warm... warm...

I need warmth. So alive... *Life!* She could help him. *You know how she can help. She has what you need.*

No! He refused to think of her that way. She was a friend, a real friend, and he cared about her. He hadn't killed Natalie before, when he didn't know her. When he'd been blown apart and desperately needed blood to heal his battered body. She'd been so vulnerable, so afraid.

So tempting...

Enough! He hadn't given in for a hundred years, and he wasn't about to now. He wouldn't think about her. He made himself picture a plate of french fries, steaming hot. Crispy on the outside, and soft on the inside, with plenty of ketchup all over them. *Nice and red and warm...*

Nick sat back on the bed, shaking.

Part 12

Tiffany M. Tamaddoni

Roland and Natalie were sitting across from each other in a comfortable living room. Nat leaned forward.

"So, tell me about Daniel," she prompted.

Well, it's not really a lie. I didn't say I don't know who Daniel is. And I really don't know much about him. Nick never did tell me what happened to him. No, I mean Nick hasn't yet told me. I'm sure he's fine. Yes, just fine.

Roland watched Natalie, noting the faraway look in her eyes. *Why is she lying about Daniel? Well, it can't hurt to tell her what she already knows.*

"Daniel," he began, not pausing when Natalie snapped back to reality, "was an orphan that Nicki, Janette, and yes, LaCroix, found in England during the war. Apparently they took him in for a time."

He laughed lightly, carefully watching the effects his next words would have on Natalie. "To hear Nicki tell the story, you'd think they kept the child for Janette's sake. Tell me, can you imagine Janette wanting to settle down in England and raise a child?"

Natalie frowned. *That is how Nick told it. But he's right, Janette is too French to be happy in England and too free to care for a child. Why did Nick lie? What was he covering?* "Oh, I dunno. I try never to underestimate Janette."

What game was Nicki playing with her? "That's very wise. Anyway, as I was saying, there they were, a happy little family when Uncle LaCroix decided to liven things up a bit by making Daniel *his* child, if you know what I mean. Well, Papa Nicki was not happy, not happy at all."

"So what happened to Daniel?"

"That's the problem. Nicki went into a rage and swore to kill LaCroix. Janette tells me he was very convincing— even scared her. But then, Nicki's been saying he'd kill LaCroix for as long as I can remember— and that's a long time." He grinned.

Will he never get to the point? Impatiently, "What about Daniel?"

"Oh yes, so Nicki swore and stormed out. Janette followed. I guess a vampire child didn't interest her as much as a mortal one. I'm sure Nicki has an explanation for that. Of course, I'm also not sure I'd believe it. Ah, but I see you are still curious about the child. Well, as I said, Janette went with Nicki and left the child to LaCroix. There's no telling what happened to him, but from her description of the boy as a mortal, he'd have the temperament to absorb everything LaCroix could teach him. I think I wouldn't want to be in Nicki's shoes if Daniel and LaCroix are together again and out to have a family reunion."

Wonderful, Nick's being chased by LaCroix— junior and *senior— and the only person I can get help from has a lovely sense of humor. And I thought Janette could be irritating.*

Part 13

Karin Welss

Tick-tock, tick-tock. The small, antique clock on the fireplace mantel paced out the seconds with monotonous regularity and slowness. Alone in the big, empty house, Natalie waited impatiently for Roland to return from "making some inquiries." She had tried to convince him to take her along, but he was adamant in refusing, saying it was too dangerous for a mortal, and that Nicholas would never forgive him if something happened to his beloved Doctor Lambert.

As she thumbed idly through a rare-first edition copy of *Jane Eyre*— autographed by Charlotte Bronte no less— Natalie wondered, not for the first time, what exactly Nick had told his cousin about her. Then she scowled, looking at the faded ink of Charlotte's inscription, and shook her head ruefully. *Good old Roland. A ladies' man for all eternity.* She wondered briefly about what Roland had said— or done— to Charlotte to merit such an effusive dedication, then gave up on trying to read *Jane Eyre.*

Nat rose, and wandered aimlessly around the library, trailing her fingers lightly against the gilded leather spines on the shelves, looking curiously at the collection of items on the shelves. Mementos of past lives and careers, she guessed, but meaningless without Roland to tell her the stories behind them.

There was a large oil portrait hanging over the library fireplace, of an exotic dark-haired woman wearing a bright red and gold dress. Nat studied the painting for a few seconds, unsure of who it might be, but certain that she was someone who had been (or maybe still was) important to Roland. A smaller, silver-framed photo on a side table caught her attention next— she stared in fascination at a beautiful woman, coiffed and dressed like a jazz baby from the Roaring Twenties, who stared out at her coyly, above yet another lavish, black-penned inscription to "*mon amour* Roland."

Nat snorted in disgust. Great, just great. She had allied herself with the millennium's greatest vampire playboy.

She glanced at the clock for the hundredth time, and sighed. Roland had promised that he'd be back *hours* ago. Then she scowled as realization set in: she'd been tricked by Nick's smooth-talking cousin after all. He wasn't going to return before dawn, if then, and he probably had no intention of including her in his quest for Nick's whereabouts.

Cursing herself for a fool, Nat angrily snatched up her jacket and handbag, and decided it was long past time to go on her own fact-finding mission.

Giving the front door a satisfyingly noisy slam, that managed to rattle the windowpanes and china, Natalie strode angrily outside to her car.

To her surprise, she saw a young boy standing next to it, looking very lost and alone.

"Hey, here," Natalie said, with concern. "Are you okay? It's awfully late to be out..."

The boy turned his face to her, and bestowed her with an angelic smile. "I've been lookin' for you, miss," he replied, in an English accent.

Then he snarled at her, exposing vampire fangs. Nat gasped, recognizing the boy vampire Daniel from Nick and Roland's descriptions, just before she was grabbed from behind, and a large, cold hand descended over her mouth and nose, cutting off both her cries and her air supply.

"My dear Doctor Lambert," she heard a voice say, in tones like oiled silk. "It's wonderful to meet you at last. Nicholas has told me so much about you..."

Where is he? Natalie tried to ask, just before the ground disappeared from beneath her feet, and she found herself airborne above the nighttime lights of Montreal.

She didn't need to ask who the voice belonged to.

* * *

"Natalie?" Roland strolled into his foyer, expecting the petite doctor to come rushing up, demanding news of Nick. *Women are so predictable,* he thought smugly, *especially where cousin Nicki is concerned.*

Unfortunately, he had forgotten how unpredictable Natalie Lambert was. His voice echoed emptily through the dark-panelled hall, and there was no reply. Had she fallen asleep waiting for him to return? Granted, getting the information he needed had taken a *bit* longer than expected...

Roland paused, and expanded his keen vampiric senses. Her unique scent, composed of warm blood, lightly scented shampoo, and the faint trace of formaldehyde, was already hours old. And his preternatural hearing could detect no mortal heartbeats in this house.

Perhaps she had grown tired of waiting for him, and left of her own accord. Roland rejected this theory when he remembered that her conservative blue sedan was still parked outside on the street.

Roland, very cautiously, left the house, to where Natalie's car stood forlorn against the curb. And he smelled the unmistakable taint of recent vampire presence.

"Damn!" swore Roland, viciously. "Damn, damn, damn!"

* * *

Left undisturbed by his captors, Nick had fallen back into an uncomfortable doze, tortured by the remembered smell and taste of fresh human blood. He dreamed of warm female flesh under his lips, and the iron-salt rush quenching the unbearably pleasurable aching of his fangs.

Somewhere within his prison, a door slammed open. Nick woke instantly from his uneasy sleep, and leapt up, ready to confront his captors despite the deadly, hunger-induced fatigue that numbed his mind and drained his strength.

The sounds were coming closer. Nick could detect the sound of a mortal heartbeat and the smell of...

... formaldehyde overlaid with the sweet scent of woman?

Before Nick could overcome the shock of recognition, the door to his cell opened, and slammed shut again. As Nick stared in disbelief at the motionless figure of Natalie Lambert, now lying unconscious on the small cot in the corner of his cell, a dreadfully familiar figure stepped up to the bars surrounding the little window in the cell door.

"Ah, awake at last, Nicholas. What, no pleasant hello for an old friend?" said a voice that had haunted Nick's nightmares for the past year.

Nick snarled without looking his captor, his attention focused on Natalie's unmoving form.

"Well, no matter," continued LaCroix, conversationally. "I thought you might be getting lonely in there, by yourself, not to mention hungry, so I brought you a playmate. I thought that you might enjoy an intimate dinner for two..."

He chuckled unpleasantly, a sound echoed by a smaller, younger voice, and walked away. But Nick wasn't paying his departure any attention.

He stood, pressing himself against the wall, as far away from Natalie Lambert as the confines of the cell would allow, his hands clenched into fists as he willed himself to ignore the seductive call of her heartbeat.

Part 14

Janet[te] Dornhoff

"Wot's your game, then?"

LaCroix turned lazily to Daniel, a hint of scorn in his eyes. "Game? This is quite serious, boy."

"Don't I know it!" said Daniel, as always frustrated when trying to talk to LaCroix. In his heart, Daniel suspected this was all LaCroix's way of punishing him for trying to run away again. Another of his little *lessons*. "I know you. You've always got an angle. What are you going to do to Nicky?"

"Just what you've seen. I've decided it's high time I cured Nicholas of his foolish notions, once and for all. Sooner or later, he'll have to feed, and when he does, he'll give up these silly attempts to become mortal." LaCroix returned his gaze to the book on his lap, but Daniel knew he wasn't really reading it, just using it as a cover for thought.

"An' what if he doesn't?"

"Then," LaCroix said, arching an eyebrow, "I suppose he'll get the end to his immortality that he's been seeking. One way or another."

Daniel kicked the table-leg, his foot aching slightly at the contact with wood. "Dammit, why? Why can't you just leave him alone? Why can't you leave us all alone?"

"And supposing I had, where would you be? You couldn't even handle one foolish mortal kidnapper. Would you rather I'd left you there?" LaCroix's face never betrayed much emotion, but Daniel could sense the anger building, like storm clouds on the horizon. "Or perhaps you wish I'd left you alone in London? You'd be in your seventies by now, old, or long since dead and buried. Do you really want that? Foolish boy."

"I never asked for it, I never wanted it! I was a kid, all I wanted was to be safe, and have a family who loved me. But you, you had to have your little joke. You had to go and spoil things." Daniel felt a familiar thrill of fear, remembering what words could cost him. But he was too angry to stop now, too tired. He wanted to hurt LaCroix. "I think you were jealous, 'cos Nick hated you and he loved me!"

"Oh, no. I wasn't jealous. You see, boy, Nicholas *did* ask for what I gave him. Nicholas *wanted* what I had to offer him. Wanted it so badly, he gave up everything to follow me, to be what I was. He gave himself to me, and did it gladly."

The anger faded, as LaCroix remembered those times. "Oh, if only you could have seen him then! For four hundred years, we were closer than any happy family you could possible crave. We reveled in what we were, what we could do. You could have learned a lot from Nicholas, then."

"I don't believe you! Nicky was me mate, he was always so kind, I'll never believe he could be like you!" Daniel tried to believe what he was saying, but it had a hollow ring. LaCroix had warned him to go away, while he still could. It was Janette and Nick who'd kept him. For a while. *He sent you away. Nick didn't want you, he* made *you go away.* He'd only seen Nick once, after that, and then *Nick* had gone away, for good.

"Why don't you ask him? He can't deny what he was, what he is. He's only hurting himself trying." LaCroix sighed theatrically. "I'm forever surrounded by ungrateful children."

The book landed with a thud on the floor as LaCroix tossed it aside. "Nicholas is mine, just as you are mine. You seem to have forgotten that while I was away."

Daniel kicked the table again, wondering how much longer he could stand LaCroix's company. If he were a normal kid, he'd be long gone, on his own. But LaCroix was right, he didn't *want* to be old, or dead, or whatever.

I suppose I am ungrateful. After all, Nicky sent me away. LaCroix's the one who came and brought me back... and across. Daniel always regretted his outbursts, once they were over. One way or another. He turned, and stalked off to his room, wishing he didn't hate LaCroix so much. Or love him so much.

Part 15

Karin Welss

"What do you mean, 'Natalie Lambert has gone missing'?" Stonetree said in a dangerously soft tone of voice, leaning close to Schanke. "First Knight, and now Natalie... I don't get it."

Schanke rolled his chair backward a few centimeters.

"Hey, don't blame me," he protested, raising his hands defensively. "I don't make the news, I just report it. Maybe the two of them eloped or went to a cheap motel, or something. You know that everyone around here knows they have a *thing* going..."

"That's not funny," growled Stonetree. "If we don't hear from them in another twenty-four hours, I'm calling Internal Affairs."

Schanke grimaced and nodded, more worried about his eccentric partner and his medical examiner girlfriend than he cared to admit. With a sigh, he turned back to yet another report form in the job's endless round of paperwork.

The phone rang.

"Detective Schanke here," he said, relieved at the interruption from the paperwork.

His jaw dropped as he heard a cultured, French voice say: "Detective, how pleasant to hear your voice again. This is Roland d'Agincourt— do you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you!" Schanke snapped. "You killed that girl, the policewoman's sister... and then you obviously faked a suicide."

"Now, now," said Roland smoothly. "We both know that was an accidental death, not murder. I believe I was cleared of the charge, yes?"

"Huh," replied Schanke, unimpressed. "What do you want?"

Roland paused, then spoke again, in a voice that implied he was about to embark on a very delicate subject. "Now, Detective, I'm going to have to ask you to keep this confidential. But it concerns the recent disappearance of my cousin, Nicholas Knight, and his friend, the charming Doctor Lambert—"

"Cousin!?" yelped Schanke. "You're Nick's COUSIN!?"

Heads began to turn curiously in his direction, and aware of the attention, Schanke lowered his voice.

"What is going on here? Are Nick and Nat okay? His boss is about to go ballistic..."

Roland sighed. "Again, I'm going to have to ask for the strictest confidence. Nicholas and Natalie are both unharmed— at the moment— but I need your help. You see, I'm afraid I suffer from the same... *allergy*... to sunlight as my cousin, and I need the help of someone who can move about in the daylight hours to help."

Schanke grimaced. "I'm probably going to end up demoted to Parking Patrol for pulling a stunt like this, but he's my partner. What do you want me to do?"

Part 16

Valerie Lynn Meachum

No! I can't!

Janette sat bolt upright in the darkness. "Nicholas?" But she was quite alone, and reaching out in search of his mind came up empty as it had for days.

The voice had been so clear, though, a cry of desperation cut off as soon as it was voiced, and she felt certain it was no stray scrap of dream. "But where *are* you?" she whispered, straining for an answer.

This frightened her most of all, the silence of a mind whose presence at some level of her awareness had been a constant of her life for nearly eight centuries. Nick could not shut her out if he wanted to, not if she truly wanted to know what he was feeling and where he had wandered, no matter how far that might be. She had known the moment he arrived in Toronto almost four years earlier, and felt him coming the night he finally crossed her threshold. But now there was no sign...

NO!

There! A cry more urgent than the last, silenced more quickly, but now she had a direction. From the east. From Montreal.

There would be no more sleep today. Soundlessly she slipped upstairs to make certain things would run smoothly tonight; the mistress of the tavern would be on her way as soon as the dusk allowed.

* * *

His world had narrowed to two things: the heartbeat reverberating through his skull, and the white-hot concentration turning all his mind toward resisting its call.

Almost imperceptibly, then too much not to notice, the insistent rhythm picked up its pace. The frail human body that was its source began to stir, drawing the hungry attention of the beast hunched inside him, shattering the shell of will he had built around it. He didn't know how long he had kept that up— there was no way to tell, the darkness here was always the same— but try as he might he could not recapture it.

"Mmmmmnnnn..." As consciousness returned, she filled her lungs in a great gasp, eyes wide and unable to penetrate the darkness. He remained perfectly still, found himself watching her with the predator's intensity. Sternly he ordered himself to stay where he was, but his body was screaming for sustenance and he wasn't certain how long he could make it obey. If she knew he was here...

"Where are you?" she shouted to the ceiling, sealing a mask over her fear though she didn't know if there was anyone to see it. In a flash he realized she hid it most of all from herself, could not afford to acknowledge such a weakness.

"What am I doing here?" She paused a moment, glaring sightlessly all around her. "Answer me!"

He wanted desperately to reassure her, to let her know she was not alone— wanted it more than the twisting hunger wanted her life. But then she would come to him, the need to help him keeping her own fright further at bay, and then there would be no leashing the beast.

Hands held out before her, she took tiny steps forward until she met the wall of the cell, fingers systematically searching for the door and other features, defining the properties of her prison in her mind; and gradually the heartbeat slowed from a panicked rate.

Inexorably she worked her way around the wall, moving counter-clockwise around the cell so that she must circumnavigate most of it before she found him.

And LaCroix, he knew, would not interrupt her.

Part 17

Don Bassingthwaite

Schanke swore, cursing himself for getting mixed up in whatever was going on. Something bigger and badder than the wolf in the *Three Little Pigs* was about to happen. He knew it. His partner was right in the middle of it. And he was diving in after him.

He hauled the cooler out of the back seat of his car. It was one of the cheap styrofoam jobs from a hardware store, but Roland had warned him that time was of the essence. Schanke had already been to Nick's apartment, getting inside with the alarm code Roland had given him. The things Roland had instructed him to pick up were almost exactly where he had said they would be. A small oblong box with a wooden cross inside (Schanke wouldn't have called it a much of a cross— it looked more like two pieces of driftwood lashed together). Nick's heavy sunglasses from the pocket of the last coat Schanke had seen him wearing (at least being a detective gave you a good memory for details, Schanke thought gratefully). A heavy blanket. A corkscrew.

Roland hadn't said why he needed any of the stuff. The way he had told Schanke what to collect smacked of assembling a kit for a rescue mission. But a rescue mission with a cross and corkscrew?

He tucked the cooler under his arm and straightened his tie self-consciously as he crossed the street towards the Raven. He was always uncomfortable with the place and its creepy patrons. He could never quite understand what Knight found so appealing about it— aside from some of the more exotic female clientele. That one... Alma. Schanke still got chills up and down his spine when he thought of her, although he wasn't sure if the chills were illicit pleasure or outright terror.

He paused on the threshold of the door for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the shifting lights inside the club, then cut across the floor towards the bar. A few people gave the cooler strange looks, but most simply ignored it. He went up to the bar and waved at the bartender. "I need to see Janette!"

"She's not here."

"It's an emergency!" He dug out his badge. "I'm a cop!"

"Sorry— she's still not here. Can I take a message?"

"No! Look, can you tell me where she's gone?"

"Does the Chief Of Police tell you where he goes? I don't know."

Schanke was on the verge of swearing again when a slightly abrasive voice cut into his futile conversation. "I'm the assistant manager. May I help you?"

"Finally! Yeah, I need..." Schanke turned around and blinked. Standing beside him was a woman in black leather, with half her head shaved and multiple piercings. "You're the assistant manager?"

"Wanna make something of it?"

"Uh— no. Not at all."

Good. My name's Myra."

"What a coincidence! That's my wife's name."

"Too bad for her. What can I do for you, detective?"

Schanke abruptly remembered the cooler under his arm. "I need to pick up a dozen bottles of the Raven's private stock."

The woman's eyebrows went up. "I'm sorry, but the private stock is available to members only. Unless you have a warrant for it, I can't let you take any."

"What? No, this isn't police business! It's for..." he hesitated. "I was supposed to talk to Janette about this. Where can I get a hold of her?"

"I'm afraid she had to leave town rather suddenly tonight. Family emergency."

"She's not going to be back before tomorrow?"

"No."

"Damn!" Schanke slammed his fist down on the counter. "Okay— this may not make much sense to you but the message I was supposed to give Janette was that Roland needs this stuff for his cousin Nick. It's an emergency."

Myra sucked in her breath. "You should have said that in the first place."

A few minutes later, Schanke was staggering out of the Raven with a tightly-sealed cooler full of the club's private stock. Myra had explained that this was how all of the take-out orders for special stock were treated and advised him against trying to get into the cooler. He set it carefully in the back seat of the car and then slid behind the wheel. Next stop— the airport and the private jet Roland had said would be waiting to take him to Montreal.

Part 18

Janet[te] Dornhoff

Natalie always woke up slowly, drifting up through layers of dreams back to her own mind and body. First she became aware of her heart beating, the steady *lub-dub* of the pulmonary and atrioventricular valves closing in sequence. Then the feel of the sheets against her skin, smooth and warm from body heat. Then the feel of sunlight filtering in through her eastern window, gently warming her cheek...

Only the air on her cheek was cool, and slightly damp. Natalie realized she still felt the cotton of the skirt she'd been wearing. Had she been up late last night? As she reached for memory, it all came flooding back to her. She gasped, remembering the hand covering her mouth and nose, the red fog creeping in from the edges of her vision as she slowly smothered. She couldn't see a damn thing now. He could still be there, watching, waiting.

"Where are you?" she called, steeling herself for an evil chuckle, a threat, or worse yet, a hand suddenly cutting off her air again, returning her to oblivion. Nothing. Her heartbeat was the only sound. *Lub-dub, lub-dub.*

She struggled up, untangling her clothing and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. Her shoes echoed off stone or concrete. They had to be there, somewhere.

"What am I doing here? Answer me!" The silence was getting on her nerves.

Nobody home, she thought. *Maybe they've left me here. Abandoned in some cave or dungeon or something.* Natalie shook her head. It certainly wasn't a cave. She could just make out a block of light on the wall, with bars across it. Not enough light to illuminate its surroundings. With nothing to connect it to, she couldn't even really tell how far it was. She carefully stood, holding her hands before her as she made her way along the edge of the bed. The wall. Cool cement. She followed it to the window. Her fingers brushed a crack, vertical, the edge of a door. The window was small, and all she could make out was a few feet of hallway to either side. The light came from the left.

Lub-dub. Lub-dub.

Inexorably she worked her way around the wall, moving counterclockwise around the cell so that she must circumnavigate most of it before she found him.

And LaCroix, he knew, would not interrupt her.

It was only a couple of feet from the door to the other wall, opposite the bed. Was there anything else in here, a toilet, a chair, anything? Water? Food? Again, her mind whispered that maybe, in the dark, they were watching her. She remembered the boy's fangs, the cold fingers on her face.

Stop it, she thought; *You'll only wear yourself out. There's no one here.* She moved a little further, running her hands up and down the wall searching for—

So close. Nick couldn't stand it any more. "Stay away!" he choked.

Natalie jumped backwards, peering around helplessly. Her calf caught the edge of the bed and she sprawled back, sat down hard. The bed creaked loudly.

At least I didn't scream, some part of her thought. *Well, not much, anyway.* It took her a moment to catch hold of herself, as she struggled to see when there was nothing *to* see.

Lub-dub! lub-dub! lub-dub! As she leaped away, as her heart sang with fear, Nick almost leaped after her, almost claimed his prey then and there. He buried his face in his knees, pulling himself into an even tighter ball, huddling further into the corner, trying to close out that insistent rhythmic siren's song.

"Wh— who's there?" Nat's throat was closing up on her, her hands shaking, her heart...

No! For a moment, she willed her traitor heart to silence, then she realized how futile that impulse was. But they could hear it, they could see her, hear her, find her. Just like Nick could. But they weren't Nick.

Her face. Nick looked up, looked at her wide eyes, her white teeth biting into her lip to hold in the scream she couldn't allow herself. *Natalie.* He struggled to speak, to calm the fear that was calling to him, luring him, awakening his instincts.

"Nat?"

It was just one word, but it was all Natalie needed to hear. *Nick!*

His voice gave her a target, and she could just make out his face, the faint light reflecting off his pale, pale skin. Paler than usual. His eyes, watching her. They glittered, but they were blue. He was still himself, her friend. For now. Fear of the unknown was suddenly replaced with another, more real. But this fear wasn't as strong as her concern for another.

"Nick? Are you okay?" She knew it sounded empty, it hardly covered the magnitude of the situation. But it was what mattered.

"Just... just stay away. Just stay there." Nick drew in a long, shuddering breath, tried to ignore the scent of fear and formaldehyde. "Yeah, I'm okay. But Nat... I don't know for how long."

How long? *Do it now,* a voice inside suggested. *Maybe you still have some control.* Nick ignored it. "Nat... how long... how long have I been...?"

Natalie sighed in relief. If he was talking to her, she could handle it. "Um... you disappeared four or five days ago. I'm not sure how long I was out."

Nat's hand went to the pocket of her jacket, felt a familiar packet there. She'd been afraid they'd searched her, taken it. One of her protein powders. But there was nothing to mix it in, and Nick could still only really handle liquids. *Oh, well. It might not do any good, anyway.*

"Four days." Nick had lost all track of time, down here.

Especially since they'd brought Nat.

"You... you've gone... without... for that long before, haven't you?" Nat tried to remember. Hadn't it been three or four days when Nick was undercover in Twelve Steps to Freedom? *And the result?* she shivered. *He'd been ready to kill.*

"Not without... consequences..." Nick admitted.

"But you've been able to go for longer lately, right?" Nat tried to sound encouraging, but suspected she only sounded desperate. "I mean, you've held a crucifix, you've taken garlic pills, there must be some improvement?"

"Natalie... I woke up in here. I was hurt. It takes a lot, to hurt one of us, to knock one of us out."

Us, insisted the voice, *You* are *a vampire,* it whispered. Nick turned away, stared at the window, away from her throat, her heartbeat. "Recovery takes a lot, too."

Natalie remembered, when he'd woken up in her morgue, how the first thing he'd done was grab an IV bag. Yes, he'd been hungry. She huddled against the wall, watching his eyes.

The fear was back, but not the terror from before. Nick felt he had to be honest about the situation. Nat had to know the real danger, so she'd be careful. So she wouldn't try to help him, or touch him, or...

But the blood was calling to him...

Lub-dub! Lub-dub! Lub-dub! Lub-dub! Lub-dub! Lub-dub! Lub-dub!

Part 19

Karin Welss

Schanke landed in Montreal an hour before dawn. As promised, Roland was there at the airport to meet him. In fact, he was standing at the foot of the deplaning stairs, as Schanke climbed cautiously out of the Lear Jet, a white Styrofoam cooler clutched tightly to his chest.

"Good," said Roland, by way of greeting. "You brought the stuff... How very pleasant to see you again, Detective Schanke."

Schanke looked at Roland suspiciously. "What I wanna know is, how did you manage to return from the dead? The last time I saw you, you were being investigated for murder, and you killed yourself. I saw your body myself."

"I believe I had already been cleared of the murder charges by that time, Detective," Roland corrected gently."And you might say that reports of my death were greatly exaggerated... "

As he followed Roland out of the airport and towards the parking lot, Schanke wasn't ready to let Roland evade his line of questioning. "But I saw... and besides, what about Nat? She *autopsied* you, for Chrissakes! And wrote you a death certificate."

"Well, there must have been a mistake, hmm, Detective?" Roland asked patiently, as he found his car, a large, expensive sedan, and unlocked the passenger side for Schanke. "Because I am clearly not dead. In fact, quite the contrary. I am standing here, chatting with you while poor cousin Nicki and Dr. Lambert lie captive somewhere in this city."

Schanke got in the car, settling the heavy cooler securely on his lap. He was clearly unappeased by Roland's explanation.

As Roland started the car, he glanced at his passenger with a half-smile. He suddenly looked a great deal like Nick, thought Schanke. Yeah, he looked like Nick all right— Nick, when he was being difficult. .

"We'll talk more, once we're safely back at the house. I promise I'll explain everything," Roland said, soothingly, as he steered the car out of the parking lot.

* * *

They arrived back at Roland's house, just as the eastern horizon began to turn pale.

To Roland's surprise, a familiar but unexpected female figure was waiting for them at the front door. It took Schanke a moment to recognize her— Nick's friend, Janette. Dressed in a long coat, and, incongruously, dark sunglasses.

Roland was also clearly surprised to see her, although he did manage to gallantly kiss her hand as the two men came up the front walk.

"I know where he is," she said, without preamble, ignoring Schanke. "But I need your help."

She was clearly unhappy about having to make the request.

Schanke stared at her.

"Hey, Janet. Fancy meeting you here— Montreal's a popular destination these days. You looking for Nick, too?" he said, just as Roland asked her: "Where?"

She gave Schanke a look of open contempt before continuing her conversation with Roland, in French.

Schanke watched them impatiently, shifting the cooler from arm to arm, as the discussion continued. He wished he'd paid more attention to his French classes in high school.

Finally, after several long minutes, Roland remembered Schanke's presence, and turned to him. He began to explain out of courtesy, "Janette's located Nick... and Natalie. They are all right— for now— but we need to discuss—"

Janette interrupted, looking anxiously at the pale gray sky through her sunglasses. "Roland, you idiot. It's almost dawn. Open the door and let us in. Or did you want to risk... sunburn?"

As Roland obliged her, pulling out a large, old-fashioned brass key from his jacket pocket, Schanke said, incredulously, "Don't tell me— Nick's allergy is catching? You too?"

Janette stalked into the foyer without replying. As Schanke followed her in, setting down the styrofoam cooler full of bottles with a thump, she turned around to glare at him, and then transferred the glare to Roland.

"Why is *he* here?" she demanded, shrugging off her elegant black wool coat. "And what does he know?"

"Nothing, yet," said Roland.

"— which is gonna change, real soon, right?" hinted Schanke, frustrated.

"We could handle this ourselves," Janette suggested, and Roland shook his head, smiling.

"What, and risk 'sunburn,' *cherie*?" he quipped. "No, we need Detective Schanke's assistance. He has already been sworn to confidence."

Janette raised her eyebrows. "So... he *does* know? About Nick? And us?"

Roland shook his head. "Not yet."

Schanke scowled. Bad enough that he had been hauled away on some weird adventure, but he hated it when people talked about him like he wasn't there.

"Okay," he said, firmly. "I've had enough of this cutesy 'I've got a secret' business. I've just put my butt— and my job— on the line, because my partner's in some kinda trouble. I want some answers. Now."

"You're not going to like this..." warned Janette, with a derisive smile.

Schanke shook his head. "You're right. I probably won't. But I wanna hear it anyway. Besides, I've been a cop for a long time. There ain't nothing I haven't heard before."

Janette traded a look with Roland, then sighed.

"Very well, Detective Schanke. Nicholas, Roland and I are all vampires. Nicholas has been captured by an old enemy of his. And Roland thinks that *you*," she made no attempt to hide the contempt in her voice, "can help us during the daylight hours."

Schanke's jaw dropped.

"Nick's a *what*?" he sputtered, trying not to giggle, thinking it all made a weird kind of sense in light of his partner's eccentricities. "You're— *vampires*?"

"This is not a laughing matter!" snapped Janette. "Roland, say something. Convince him."

Roland closed his eyes briefly. When he reopened them, they had gone from sky-blue to an unnatural, glowing golden color. He snarled, revealing gleaming fangs. Just as abruptly, the transformation reversed itself, leaving a tall, perfectly normal-looking man standing in the dim foyer, and Schanke doubting the evidence of his eyes.

"Do you believe us now, Mr. Schanke?" Janette's voice hissed by his ear. He had not seen her move from her place, but there she was. Schanke whirled around, to see Janette, also transformed into a snarling creature with glowing eyes and fangs.

Schanke jumped, then stepped back hastily. "Okay, okay, I believe you. But, boy, do we need to have a talk."

Roland grinned mischievously. and opening a door, ushered Schanke into a richly furnished living room.

"That might be a good idea. I'm sure you have a great many questions."

"No kidding," muttered Schanke under his breath as he followed Janette in. "Man, oh man, Knight, you really did it this time."

* * *

Hours later, with the sun pouring scaldingly bright rays from the late afternoon sky outside, the little group in the darkened living room had finalized their plans.

Schanke still felt somewhat bemused, but for now, he was convinced enough to go along with the whole thing. But he and Knight were going to have a serious *talk* once this was all over, he vowed to himself.

How, out of the millions of cops in the world, did he get stuck with a partner who was a fucking *vampire*?

He followed Roland and Janette out to the garage, where he found Roland opening the trunk of a gunmetal-colored Lincoln Town Car. Schanke whistled approvingly.

"Nice car. You should see the pile of junk Knight drives around."

"The Caddy?" Roland asked, squeezing his tall frame, with some difficulty, into the Town Car's trunk. "Well, it may be old, but I have to say as far as trunk space goes..."

Janette walked around Schanke, and peered dubiously at the meager space remaining in the trunk.

"Don't worry, my dear," Roland reassured her, with a flash of white teeth."You won't have any problems fitting... It will just be a little cozy, that's all."

Janette sniffed, and stooped to remove her expensive black leather pumps before climbing in.

"That's what I was afraid of. You had better keep your hands to yourself, Roland," she warned him, clearly unamused.

As Janette settled herself gingerly in the curve of Roland's body, Roland addressed Schanke. "You have the directions? Everything clear to you?"

"Yeah," replied Schanke, clearly fascinated by the sight of Janette settling herself in the trunk of the Town Car.

As Schanke went to close the lid over the two vampires, he heard her mutter, "The things I do for you, Nicolah..."

Then he went around to the driver's side, climbed in, and started the engine.

It was time to get down to business.

Part 20

Valerie Lynn Meachum

Her eyes were growing somewhat accustomed to the near-nonexistent light, but somehow that didn't make Natalie feel any better about their situation.

"We need to do something."

The voice from the gloom was desolate. "Like what?"

"I don't know!" She couldn't afford to let him give up; despair was far too contagious. "You're the one who's made it through 800 years in one piece! Are you just going to sit there forever?"

"I can only think of one alternative."

That was *not* what she wanted to hear. "There has to be a way out of here, Nick. There's always a way out."

"Are you sure?"

Dammit, how come every time he said that the answer seemed to be no? Not that she could ever say so, of course. "Prove to me there isn't," she challenged instead.

"You can't prove something doesn't exist," Nick countered impatiently, rising to the debate with more energy than he had shown since she had found herself here. "There's always room for doubt. The world is a very big place."

"That's right. It has room for vampires, and psychics, and all sorts of things that go bump in the night... and a chance to get the hell out of here!"

"All right." She hadn't been aware that he moved, but now the voice was just over her right shoulder. "What do you suggest, Nat?"

His tone made it clear that he didn't expect her to have any ideas, that he didn't think there were any ideas, and she would be damned if she was going to agree with that. "I *suggest* we put our heads together and stop working at cross purposes, for a start!"

"That sounds like a good idèa. After all, we're friends, right?"

There was an edge in his voice that she didn't like at all, and suddenly she questioned the wisdom of drawing him out of his inertia by starting an argument. "Right..."

"And that's why you came to help me. And we both walked right into his trap. He can trap *anyone*."

"Nick, this isn't helping..."

"I know. I'm sorry." Now he sounded almost like himself again, and Natalie wished fervently that she could see his expression through the shadows. "But the only option I've been given isn't an option at all."

She tried to laugh, failed abysmally. "Just so long as you remember that."

Backing a step away from her, as if he had just noticed how close he was standing, he answered, "I'm too close to forgetting now."

Part 21

Janet[te] Dornhoff

Natalie resisted the urge to pace while she thought, to get up and move, knowing that it would bring her too close to Nick in this tiny cell. She forced herself to keep calm and think logically.

"Nick, maybe we can figure a way out, if we know how we got in here in the first place. What's the last thing you can remember before you woke up in here?"

Nick tore his mind away from the steady heartbeat, and struggled to remember. It was getting so hard to think. To think about anything except his need, his immortal body slowly dying around him.

"Let's see. I was painting, but I was worried about something. No, about someone. Daniel. I remember... I was worried about what would happen to him. I talked to him, as part of the case, but there were always other people around. We only got a few moments alone together. He said he'd... he'd run away. That he'd left LaCroix. He started to say more, but Schanke and someone from Social Services came in, and he was gone before we could speak again."

Memories washed over him. Janette, so tender and maternal. LaCroix so jealous. And Daniel... "It's all my fault, Nat. All of it. If I'd just made sure Daniel got away, that he went somewhere LaCroix couldn't find him. I should have known, LaCroix wouldn't let him escape."

He remembered holding Daniel, comforting him during a bombing, as he cried for the mother he'd lost to the war. "It was so hard to let him go, Nat. I was teaching him to play the old grand piano in the parlor. He had plenty of time to practice... while we slept... he was such a good student..."

"Nick!" How could she talk to him, when his mind kept drifting off? Nat had to keep him here, in the present. So he wouldn't forget that it *was* the present. She knew from experience that he could sink into depression very easily. The last time, he'd barely snapped out of it in time. "Nick, it's not your fault. You tried. But it's too late to change what happened. Right now, we've got to think about how to get out of here!"

Nick's eyes were closed, his expression pained. Nat suddenly realized that she could *see* his expression. Her eyes weren't adjusting to the dark, it was getting lighter! She jumped up to look out the window. She could see further down the hall now, into another room. Especially the light shifting its way down from above.

"Damn! That bastard's left a skylight open!" She looked down at Nick, then at the room. The sunlight couldn't get in directly, and it only seemed to be direct sunlight that burned him. He'd sat in the witness stand in a courtroom with open blinds as a shaft of light hit the table only inches away. But Nat knew it was terribly uncomfortable. And draining.

LaCroix, she thought, *is making this as hard as possible for Nick.*

Natalie pulled the rough blanket off of the bed, and tossed it over Nick to give him some protection. He was only half-conscious, muttering and crying out softly. He wouldn't be up to talking about escape now, not for hours. Natalie could only hope that someone, Roland or Schanke, maybe, would find them. But how the heck could they track someone who travelled by air?

Without Nick to cheer up, Nat found her own spirits dropping rapidly. There really wasn't much hope, was there? Especially not without Nick helping her. And she couldn't help but wonder what state he'd be in when he woke up.

She tried to think. Daniel said he'd run away. Was that the truth, or just a lie to lure Nick out? Could she convince Daniel to help them? Or trick LaCroix? Where were they, anyway? In another part of the house, away from the light. Would they just leave them here, and if so, for how long?

Natalie didn't really want to think about that.

Eventually, the strain and fear caught up with her, and Natalie fell into an exhausted sleep of her own. Nick slumped in the corner, lost in dreams and memories.

"Janette," he muttered. *"Ma jeanette... ma belle petite croix..."*

He was back in Paris, in a candle-filled chamber, with the two he'd been closest to for eight centuries. *"J'ai faim..."* LaCroix's voice came back to him, coaxing and gentle but firm, like a father's. Telling him what to do. *Il faut tuer.*

"Non," he cried, *"Non! Janette... Janette..."* His voice faded to a murmur, all strength gone, but still not defeated. *"Nous sont les coupables, Janette..."*

* * *

✎ French notes: "La Croix" is "The Cross", or "The Church". A "jeanette" is a small cross, worn about the neck; Nick might have used it as a term of affection, as a play on words. *"J'ai faim"* ("I hunger") and *"Il faut tuer"* ("Must kill") are from the flashbacks in "Dark Knight". *"Nous sont les coupables"* is Nick's line to Janette in the "Love You to Death" episode, when he explains why he stopped killing all together. "I finally realized the complete hypocrisy of killing only the guilty. The truth is, we are the guilty. And they are the innocent."

Part 22

Sharon S. Scott

Schanke felt in the seat for his gun. Janette had informed him in icy tones that such a weapon would be useless against the sort of people they would be dealing with, but he had loaded it anyway after shutting the lid of the trunk.

Schanke drove carefully, not wanting to get stopped for a traffic violation, and, having been in Traffic, he knew all the tricks. He was also very conscious of the pair in the trunk. Roland and Janette had given him explicitly detailed instructions to the Chateau de Ramezay.

Yeah, thanks, guys, for treating me like a tourist. He had been to Montreal before, plenty of times, and had even toured the Chateau with Myra and his Mom and Dad. He knew it was supposedly the oldest building in Montreal and was formerly the residence of a French governor. Roland had said it was now a museum, open during the day for tours. So what was Knight doing there? If he really was there. He still wasn't sure he believed what Roland and Janette had told him. Knight a vampire? *Yeah, right. And I'm the Tooth Fairy.*

Although it *did* explain a few things about the "fair-haired boy" of the Toronto PD.

The TownCar purred across the bridge, traversing the newer part of the city, and into the Old Town. Here the streets were rough, and the car bounced a bit. Janette cursed under her breath in French as she was jostled against Roland.

* * *

Nat heard footsteps. They seemed to be those of a child, not an adult. They came steadily towards the barred doorway of the cell–like room, echoing on the stone. Then they stopped, and Nat almost screamed as a small pair of hands appeared, gripping the bars set in the doorway.

Then a boy's face appeared. He *looked* human. He stared at her for a few moments, and sniffed the air, then his eyes searched the room, stopping at the trembling figure huddled under the blanket.

"'Ey, Miss. Whot's wrong with Nicky?"

Part 23

Karin Welss

Nat took a deep breath, then straightened her shoulders.

"You must be Daniel," she said, as calmly as she could. "Nick's told me a little bit about you."

The boy grinned at her. "Yeah, he taught me how to play the piano, Miss. But wot's wrong with him?"

"I— I don't know," Natalie said, a little desperately, not wanting to voice the real reason. She didn't know if she could trust the boy's apparent concern for Nick, or if this was some sort of sadistic game instigated by their captor. "Daniel, why are we here?"

The boy's face turned sullen. "'Cos *he* wants to get even with Nicky, that's why. And it's all my fault, see— I ran away, and Nicki tried to help me."

"Could you help us now?" Nat asked, a shade too eagerly. "Open the door? Please, Daniel— Nick might— well, I don't know— if you don't."

Daniel's eyes shifted nervously. "Oh, I can't do that, miss," he replied, in hushed tones. "See, I already caught it bad for runnin' away. *He'd* put me out in the sunlight if I opened the door for you, miss."

He looked at her pleadingly, his eyes begging for understanding.

Nat let out a long breath, her shoulders slumping. Her brow creased with despair as she jammed her fists into her jacket pockets and frantically tried to think of some alternative plan, before Daniel decided to leave. Her hand encountered a square packet, and Nat looked up at Daniel with a surge of renewed hope. It wasn't much, but it was something at least.

"Daniel," she said quietly. "Look, if you can't help us find a way out of here, can you at least get me a glass of water? Please...?"

Daniel looked hesitant again. "I... *he* said not to give 'im anything..."

"Yeah I know. That's why I'm here, isn't it?" Nat shuddered despite herself, then continued. "But he— LaCroix— didn't say anything about me, did he? You could get *me* a glass of water, couldn't you?"

There was a long pause, as Daniel considered.

"Okay, miss," he said finally. "I guess a glass of water couldn't hurt..."

Nat let out a long sigh of relief, and slumped against the cell wall as Daniel's face disappeared from the cell door window.

Endless minutes passed while she waited for him to return. Finally, she heard the lock on the door click open and the handle turn.

"What the hell," she said to herself, and lunged forward as the door began to open. An iron grip caught her arm as she tried to rush out of the cell, and then she was slammed back into the wall.

"Thought you might try givin' me the slip, miss," Daniel said, without rancor. He handed her a plastic cup of water, from which not a single drop had been spilled during her aborted escape attempt. The vampire who looked like an eleven-year-old boy had literally stopped her single-handedly.

Nat accepted the water numbly, and watched the cell door slam shut. If Daniel was that strong, then Nick...

She suddenly realized how very, very lucky she had been so far, trapped in a cell with a vampire— a man— her friend— who was starving to death because of that friendship.

"Oh, Nick..." she whispered, looking at the fair hair spilling out from under the blanket. Then, the brisk, efficient part of her that was Doctor Lambert took over. She dumped the packet of protein powder into the water, and stirred briskly with her finger. Carefully setting the glass of milky liquid down where she couldn't accidentally knock it over, she walked over to the cot, and put her hand on Nick's shoulder.

"Nick," she began to say. "I've found something—"

Everything happened too quickly to follow then. And somehow, Nat was being slammed into the wall again, pinned there by something large and immensely strong. She looked up and gasped as a cold hand tangled itself in her hair, and gripped her skull, forcing her head back.

Nick's eyes were wide and golden-green with vampire hunger. He snarled, and she could see that his fangs had descended. They looked very long and very sharp.

"Nick, stop it!" she commanded sharply, hoping to bring him to his senses. "I've—"

His mouth descended on hers in a hard kiss, cold and devouring. *Not like this!* she tried to protest. This was not Nick kissing her, but someone— *something*— else, something cruel and predatory. Something that growled as it tried to force its tongue into her mouth to taste her. Held in a relentless grip, she couldn't turn her face away, couldn't even struggle.

"I'm sorry, Nat," she thought she heard him whisper, just before his cold lips moved down to her throat.

* * *

Schanke drove around to the shady side of the building, parking the Town Car near an entrance to the chateau marked PRIVATE— STAFF ONLY. After scanning the empty courtyard for possible witnesses, he reached down and pulled the latch that unlocked the trunk. He reached over to the passenger side and got the kit of stuff.

As he stepped out of the car, he saw that Janette and Roland had emerged from the trunk.

"Leave the cooler for now, Detective," Roland ordered. "We'll need to move quickly."

Janette, meanwhile had sprinted to the door, and ripped it open. As Schanke followed the pair of them into the chateau, he noticed that her skin was smoking slightly in the last rays of dusk. He also noticed the doorknob hanging at a crazy angle.

"Remind me not to arm wrestle with her," he muttered incredulously as he followed Roland into the building. Roland turned his head, and gave Schanke a quick grin. Apparently *nothing* could destroy his cheerful demeanor.

"Hurry," urged Janette. "Something's very wrong— I can sense it!"

And then she was gone, and Roland with her, moving down the corridor, and a flight of stairs leading down, at a blur. Schanke cursed, drew his gun, and followed.

"Hold on, partner," he muttered. "Cavalry's comin'."

Part 23

Veronica McKnight

Natalie's thoughts clouded as the hardness of Nick's fangs stabbed through her neck. Like a desperate animal she punched at him with her fists, rammed her knee upward; but she was held fast in his vice-like grasp. Yet she fought against the swoon that threatened to take her, even as her legs wobbled and her head swam. With a violent passion he gathered her up in his arms, *like a bunch of flowers,* she thought giddily, *like a bunch of pink flowers,* while he sucked the life out of her.

"HA ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Who was laughing?

"HA!"

Was that the door of the cell opening?

Again, Nat was roughly seized, but this time it was a monster pulling her away from Nick— or from the thing that Nick had become. Though only half-conscious, Nat struggled to see the monster. She used all of her ragged strength to turn and forced her eyes to focus upwards.

She saw a tall, evil-looking man with fair, spiked hair grinning down at her. He was the one doing the laughing. She knew at once who he was. "LaCroix," she whispered.

He held her up with an arm around her waist, an arm that was cool and solid as stone; with the other hand he kept Nick from finishing her off.

"Is Nicky going to be all right?" Daniel's voice chirped from somewhere behind her.

The man's laugh quieted, and he spoke with a deep, languorous tone, mockingly. "Well, I think this little snack did him some good." He shook Nat a little, and mouthed an obscene kiss vaguely in her direction.

"What're you plannin' on now, sir?" Daniel sounded a bit concerned, and a bit curious, too.

"Ha ha ha ha." LaCroix gave Nick a violent push which sent him crashing to the floor. Still Nick clambered back up and leapt toward Nat again, as if he hadn't even realized LaCroix was there to prevent his advances.

"Not so fast, Nicholas." LaCroix pushed him back down again and held him on the floor, his foot pressing on Nick's chest. Nick writhed and twisted like a trapped snake, his eyes crazily glowing with wild unearthly lights.

"Come here, Daniel."

The boy vampire sidled up next to LaCroix and looked down at Nick. LaCroix put his free arm over Daniel's shoulder and patted him paternally. "Nicholas is weak because he hasn't been fulfilling his potential. His immortal senses have been stifled, dulled."

Daniel nodded. " 'e's still awfully hungry, sir."

"Yes, and he will get a chance to truly satisfy that hunger." LaCroix pulled Nat close and nuzzled her neck where Nick had punctured it. Too weak to resist, Nat was nevertheless able to remain passive, determined not to give LaCroix the benefit of knowing how truly disgusting she found him to be.

"Nicholas." LaCroix spoke as if to a child. "I think it's time to exercise those lazy muscles." His mouth quirked into a bizarre smile, "We'll make it a game: *Find the lady.*" He licked Nat's neck. "*Find the lunch.*"

His laugh became even more demonic as he rose a few inches into the air with Nat limply tucked under his arm. Daniel leaned over Nick's growling face and grinned a copy of LaCroix's grin, his little fangs suddenly showing themselves. "You better hurry, Nicky," he said, "*I'm* gettin' hungry, too!"

And they were off, into the maze of secret underground passages that led out of the basement of the Chateau de Ramezay.

Nick, free now from LaCroix's constraints, flew after them, frantically, recklessly...

Part 26

Karin Welss

Roland barely managed to keep Janette in sight as they moved with blinding speed through the maze of corridors in the basement of the Chateau. Schanke had been left behind as they abandoned their carefully laid plans in response to what Janette sensed happening.

The dark-haired woman moved with desperate haste, drawn by her bond to her lover of centuries, his silent anguish, his terrible need vibrating through every nerve in her body like an electric net, drawing her in, pulling her closer to where he was.

After what seemed like an endless pursuit through musty-smelling corridors and down narrow, worn stairs, Roland skidded to a halt, barely avoiding Janette as she stopped in front of the open door to an ancient cell. She stood perfectly still, her senses straining.

"They were here," she whispered, her expanded senses catching the recent traces of Nat— and Nicholas. And other things.

The vaguely unpleasant, yeasty smell of a glass of white liquid that stood on the ground.

Recent traces of LaCroix— and Daniel.

And, the smell of fresh blood.

Janette closed her eyes briefly. Were they too late? She had finally, grudgingly admitted to herself that she liked Natalie, even if she was a mortal. And if Nicholas were responsible for her death... he would walk out into the sunlight. She was sure of it.

"Damn you, LaCroix," she whispered. "Why couldn't you just leave him alone, hmmmmm?"

Behind her, Roland had finally lost his perpetually cheerful expression as he, too, caught the scent of LaCroix, and blood.

"Oh, Nicki... you *didn't*..." he murmured, hoping his suspicions were wrong.

Janette's violet eyes snapped open, and they shared a long, dismayed look.

Then a young voice behind them piped up: "'Ello, Princess."

Part 27

Amy Lynn Hull

Roland reached around for Daniel and, almost too fast for even Janette to see, the boy was slammed into the cell wall, held by Roland's vice-grip on his arms, his feet easily three feet from the floor.

"Why, Daniel," Janette nearly purred, as Roland looked at her in amazement. "How nice it is to see you again. What has it been, forty? Fifty years?

"You know him? Oooooh, yes," Roland remembered, his puzzled look rapidly giving way to one of cynical bemusement, "LaCroix's little experiment. And how much of a part have you played in *this* experiment, 'young' Daniel?"

Roland did not loosen his hold on Daniel as he turned to gauge Janette's reaction.

Daniel ignored Roland completely. "Princess, couldn't 'e let me down now? I'm not exactly a threat to the likes of you two."

"Oh, Daniel, you know better than that," Janette continued in the same quiet tone. "LaCroix is here. You are here. Trouble is here. It is *not* difficult to see that the three are connected."

"Aw, Princess, now, you don' mean that. You know you always had a soft spot for me. Wot do you say— have 'im let me down."

"Daniel, I am not playing that game today. It is an old game, and quite tiresome. I want to know one thing: What has happened?" Janette stared coldly at the boy— but not a boy— who was looking at her defiantly.

Daniel's face fell slightly, then hardened. "An' you was so much fun, before. A'ways could sweet talk you into anything— an' we had fun at it too. Too bad you had to go and get too good for it. Forgetting where your loyalties lie."

"I learned that some are not worthy of my loyalty," Janette said, her tone almost making the last word a curse. "And I am tired of this little diversion of yours. *What has happened here, Daniel?*" Janette punctuated each word with careful diction and a menacing tone under which few could avoid cringing.

"I can't tell you that; LaCroix means it to be a... surprise," Daniel retorted, the engaging grin that seemed to be perpetually spread across his face becoming a frighteningly sinister parody of a child's expression. "I won't tell you more."

Janette turned away. "Follow me when you're done," she said simply, as she flew off, leaving Roland to deal with Daniel as he pleased, once again rapidly trailing after the scent of blood and fear and hunger than Nicholas had left behind him.

It was not long before she could simply follow the noise of an obvious dispute.

Nick had begun to shout at LaCroix and Janette began to truly fear for her friends, both vampire and mortal, as she caught snippets of Nick's accusations and curses. She flew faster, realizing in passing that if she still believed in doing so, she would be praying that this fiasco would not end in tragedy and disaster.

Rounding corner after corner in the huge house, Janette looked uncomfortably at the wholesale destruction that littered the rooms and hallways.

Nicholas has completely lost control, she realized, at the same moment remembering that she had never before seen him so destructive when he was not under direct attack. *Of course, he's rarely been so deprived, and never so provoked in such a state. This will be very bad, when he comes to himself and knows what he has done. Whatever that is exactly.*

Just then, abruptly, the noise stopped. She rounded one last corner, where there had been, moments before, an incredible clamor, and entered a room that had obviously been the scene of an incredible row. Kneeling in the middle of the row was Nick, preparing to feed on an unconscious and helpless Natalie. LaCroix was nowhere to be seen.

"Nicholas!" Janette shouted, pushing him away from Natalie before he could, again, sink sharp fangs into her soft, inviting neck. Just at that moment, with the perfect yet terrible timing Janette had to admit seemed to be peculiar to mortals, Schanke, puffing hard, came rushing around the corner, gun drawn.

She repressed the insane urge to laugh at the spectacle of this little mortal, arming himself against vampires with a mere projectile weapon; this was neither the time nor the place to find a frivolity amusing. "Schanke, get out of here! It's not safe," she warned.

"What?"

"*Get out*! Nick is hungry. You are food. It is *dangerous*!!" Janette was sometimes amazed at humans' amazing capacity to ignore the obvious, even when it was clearly stated for them.

She was not, however, amazed at all when Schanke continued to stand exactly where he had stopped. She pushed Nick away from Nat and Schanke again, thinking idly that anyone as thick as Schanke seemed to be about these things rather deserved to become lunch, but also knowing that if she allowed that, Nick would never forgive her. Or himself.

What Schanke did next did surprise her. He pulled from his coat pocket a bottle from the cooler from the Raven. "Here," he said hurriedly, throwing the bottle across the room.

Janette caught it, staring dumbfoundedly at Schanke all the while, then immediately uncorked the bottle and handed it to Nick. While Nick was draining the bottle, Janette looked a question at Schanke.

Schanke shrugged. "When you guys left me behind, I figured I should grab this after all. Be prepared, you know? Then I just followed all the noise." He smiled weakly, then finally surveyed the rest of the room.

"My God," he breathed, rushing to the heap on the floor that was Natalie. Grabbing a crumpled Kleenex from his pocket, he tried to staunch the blood that was still flowing, though slowly, from her neck. "Don't either of you have a scarf or *something*?" he demanded.

The bottle hit the floor, and a ripping sound rippled through the room. Schanke looked up to see Nick silently holding out the sleeve of his shirt. Schanke took it and continued to apply pressure to the holes in Natalie's neck. "Guys, someone should really call an ambulance. She's barely got a pulse, and I think she's lost a *lot* of blood." Nick nodded, his face an impassive mask of shock as he left at a sprint to call for help.

"LaCroix, you have gone too far this time," Janette hissed in a quietly dangerous tone, the dark flashing in her eyes testifying to her simmering anger.

"LaCroix? That's who did this?" Schanke turned a murderous look on Janette, paused, then asked, "Who the hell *is* he anyway?"

"He's one of Us. Very old, very powerful— it's too complicated to explain right now." Janette glanced at Schanke, relieved when his preoccupation with Natalie convinced him to leave the issue at that for the moment.

In the same instant, she decided not to correct what she was certain was Schanke's misapprehension about who had actually bitten Natalie. If she was right, there would be enough repercussions from that to come, and she preferred to deal with them later. *And, at any rate,* she thought, *it* is *LaCroix's fault; it is one of his carefully orchestrated plays, plotted, directed, and polished to create just the right effect. And when he goes to that much trouble, it is* very *difficult to escape the trap.*

Natalie stirred and opened her eyes. Schanke, still keeping pressure on her neck, began to immediately talk to her, repeating reassurances, asking little questions, trying to calm her and himself at the same time. But her eyes remained unfocused, staring blankly off into nowhere, and she did not respond to anything Schanke said or did.

Case in point, Janette thought, frowning deeply. *I do not relish being here when Nicholas returns and sees this. Or when LaCroix returns to play out the rest of his hand.**

She shuddered elaborately, still looking at Natalie.

Part 28

Janet[te] Dornhoff

Cold. So cold. The arms which held her gave no warmth, only more chill. A cold red fog darkened the edges of her vision. Natalie knew that, soon, the fog would close in around her one last time. So tired, it was so tempting to just sleep. If only it weren't so cold...

The arms around her were gone, the wind of flight had stopped. She was lying on a cold stone floor. She couldn't even shiver anymore.

Shock, she realized. *My body's shutting down. Nothing to run on anymore. 'Keep the patient warm to prevent shock.'*

"Sweet dreams, doctor. Soon, your knight will arrive, and perhaps he will awaken you with a kiss. The kiss of death."

Knight... Nick... Sir Nicholas? Nat almost managed to giggle. *A black knight or a white? Richard was always my White Knight.*

There was a figure standing there, a man. Nick? Was this it, then?

"You have a choice to make, Nat."

"R...Richard?" He was so faint, so far away. *But you're dead. Twice.*

Hard to hear him. Everything was muffled, from a long way away.

"You're dying, Nat. I'm here to show you the way, if you want to come."

"Don' want... t'die..."

"Nat, you *are* dying. Believe me, I know. But you can choose to stay."

"Like... you...? Was... wrong. Screwed... up..." *I begged him to do it, Richie, and look what happened. I don't want to become like that!*

"Nat, I'm not sorry. I don't blame you. We tried. You gave me a second chance. It could have worked, just like you'd planned. I was the one who screwed it up, not you."

You? My perfect, sweet little brother? If you couldn't handle it, how could I?

"You were always stronger than me, Nat. So much more in control. You were never afraid to keep trying."

"Scared... dying... living... wha'ever..." Her strength was going fast. Her brother was getting closer, but so was the fog. She could hear shouting, screaming. *Is that Nick?*

She'd thought about it so much, what she would want, what she should ask Nick to do. But how could she? It would hurt him so much. *As much as knowing he'd killed me?* She still didn't know, and now the decision was here. As the fog closed in, all she could see was Nick's face. Not the fanged, crazed face she'd last seen, but his anguished face as he found her. Cradled her still, cold form. And turned and walked into the sun.

"Want t'stay... wi' Nick... Needs me..."

And she tumbled into a warm red fog.

* * *

LaCroix watched her slip out of delirium, and into true unconsciousness. Richard. The young doctor's brother, who'd died a few months ago. A few days before that story in the tabloids.

So I was right, Nicholas. You have *been slipping.* After all his talk about how much he hated the life LaCroix have given to him, so long ago, Nicholas had brought someone else across only months ago. *And did* he *choose, Nicholas? Or did you choose for him?* No matter. The girl had only confirmed his suspicions. But this put a new twist on things. *She has chosen. She wants to stay with you. How sweet.*

He watched the pallor of her cheeks, the slow, languorous movement of her chest. Would Nicholas honor her choice, if he knew about it? *Or will you die, my dear, and Nicholas walk out into the sun?*

That was always a risk, of course, but always carefully considered. LaCroix knew Nicholas' black moods, had used them against him often enough. But it was getting harder to predict what his prodigal would do next. He had changed too much, these last few centuries. *And we* never *change.*

LaCroix had pushed him harder, this time, than in a long while. This was no inamoration with a girl he'd only gazed upon. This was, LaCroix knew; one of Nicholas' "friends," and by human standards, a close one. *How long is the longest friendship?* Perhaps he should kill her. Show him how fragile these mortals were...

No. That wasn't part of the game. *Nicholas must blame himself, not me. Well, as well as me, perhaps.*

On the other hand, LaCroix doubted that Nicholas knew how deeply he had drunk, just what condition his young doctor was in. And she was quite lovely, so pale and helpless. Would Nicholas be able to abandon her? No. She'd hold him here, in the shadows, or he'd follow her into whatever came next.

Getting closer, now. *Why, Nicholas, I didn't think you even* knew *half those tongues, let alone how to curse me in them!*

LaCroix knew it was time to go. He could watch the fun from elsewhere. He listened one last time to the slow, desperate heartbeat, the whispery breathing.

It took but a moment, then he was away.

* * *

Nick knocked the door away from its hinges, shot through like a cannon. The heartbeat was so close. There, below. He landed in a crouch, very close to her pale throat.

* * *

LaCroix reached his sanctuary, and settled in to watch the show. The impromptu rescue party had arrived, for all the good they'd do.

LaCroix adjusted the focus on the video camera. *There are definite advantages to this time,* he mused. Fiber-optic cables no bigger than a human hair led to cameras so far away not even Janette's sharp ears would be able to detect their whirring.

The human detective was pressing something to the girl's throat, trying to staunch what little blood remained. Janette looked bewildered. *You know so little about them, my dear. And now you feel helpless.* Not *something you enjoy, as I recall.*

The flip of a relay, and he could see Nicolas, tearing the main room apart in search of something. Ah, a phone. LaCroix idly wondered how on earth they would explain all of this to the mortal authorities.

Roland emerged from the hallway, and the play of emotions on that one's face was most amusing. Relief, that his cousin was alive; fear, as he saw and smelled fresh blood; concern, and then alarm, as Nicolas spoke briefly into the phone, then fell silent. Withdrawn into himself. After getting no response to his questions, Roland, glancing nervously at the skylight, put an arm around Nicolas and hustled him away. *So, you fear for him, too?*

No sign of Daniel. Oh, well. The boy wasn't important right now. Only the game.

"Les jeux sont faites."

LaCroix switched back to the mortals, and Janette. He wondered idly how her lover would react to the scene below.

Part 29

Valerie Lynn Meachum

"Nicki?" Roland was more than a little concerned about his cousin's mental state; Nick was little more animated than his injured lady. "Don't sit and stare like that. We need you."

"For what?" The answer was abrupt, accompanied by a harsh parody of a laugh. "You saw what I did to her, Roland. All I could do now would be more harm."

At least he had uttered a full sentence. They were getting somewhere. "So instead you'll sit here and pity yourself. That isn't what you need to be doing, and it isn't what she needs from you either."

That prompted an incredulous stare, and Nick replied, "What she *needs* is to have me as far from her as possible! Do you have any idea what I've done? Can you tell me you've lived all this time without seeing this happen?"

"Yes, I've seen it," Roland replied seriously. "I know. But I still believe she needs you there, if there is to be any hope. And *you* need to be there for her."

"Hope is *her* specialty, Roland." Nick shook his head. "If she dies, it dies with her."

"And what would she say about how you're behaving? Give up now and you abandon her hopes for *you*. And that would be a far deeper wound than she has already suffered."

* * *

Janette stood back a little distance from the two mortals, one working desperately to keep the other alive until the ambulance arrived. She debated whether to explain to Schanke that she knew what was wrong, that all his determinedly encouraging chatter was wasted. There was no mind within reach to respond.

Killing caused her no qualm, but this was something she could never stand— a mind destroyed, or in retreat so far from reality that nothing could reach it. She had never been quite sure which was the truth; she had never seen such a victim recover. After all her experience, she still found the consequences of feeding impossible to truly predict. One could be fairly certain most of the time of a clean kill; but there remained the rare exception who unexpectedly came over— and the rarer still who clung to physical mortal life as Natalie had.

Nick had been so desperate— even now she could sense that the need had not nearly been met— that LaCroix could only have snatched the mortal woman away within seconds. Neither Nick nor Janette killed with LaCroix's devastating lighting swiftness, but they were fast enough. That any life remained at all was proof positive both of LaCroix's prompt interference— in the situation he had set up himself!— and of Natalie's tenacious will to survive.

But there *was* no surviving, not really. The beast that lived in Nick, in each of them, sought to devour soul and self along with the blood. The destruction wrought in the very instant of the attack was enough to kill outright in most cases, and for the exceptions there was this mockery.

She wondered if LaCroix knew exactly what his little game had wrought, then chided herself for having to wonder. Even he was unlikely to have known whether Natalie would survive to become this, but certainly it had been worth the effort. Nick had still, for all practical purposes, taken her life; but this way he would be faced with the proof of it for as long as she might "live"— or as long as he could bear to live with the knowledge of what he had done.

The only alternative she could see was to finish the job— one way or the other. And she knew Nick would *not* like that.

"It doesn't look good," Schanke said heavily, startling her from her thoughts. "Man, I hope she can pull out of this. For Nick's sake too."

"For his sake especially." It would do nobody good to disabuse him of the notion that Natalie could recover. He wouldn't believe it anyway.

Part 30

Margaret Newman

Natalie blinked rapidly as she realized what she was looking at. She was looking down at herself. Her body, limp and going cold, laid on the floor with Schanke hovering over her. She was terrified at first. He was holding a cloth to her neck, and looking very afraid. There were others in the room, too. Janette a few feet away, staring and removed from what was playing out in front of her. Roland was there, his emotions boiling just under control, glaring at Nick.

Oh, Nick...

There was no pain throbbing from her neck now. Her heart was heavy with unspoken emotions, but she did not hate him, did not blame him for what had happened. So much left unsaid! So much left to do! She did not want to leave now. She did not want to leave him.

A light appeared, beaming into the room through the ceiling. The light was bright and white and pure. It encircled her body there on the floor, and Schanke. A voice whispered her name. She turned from the scene below her, and looked up into the light.

Natalie, the voice whispered her name again.

She moved toward the light, her essence floating without any effort on her part. How wonderously free she felt! The light was beautiful! Once within the Light, she felt warm and safe. Her heart, moments ago heavy with emotions, filled with joy. She gazed up into the Light, her hands reaching for it.

Natalie, the voice whispered her name a third time.

She traveled up into the Light. Memories merged, and faded. Faces began to drift away. The Light, this was what mattered, just this Light...

Natalie, She saw a person moving towards her.

Kerrie! Natalie smiled. Kerrie and she had been friends for ages. Kerrie moved closer, and their hands clasped. They smiled at each other, words were not needed. Other people appeared in the distance. They smiled their greetings. She and Kerrie went on towards them together.

* * *

"Damn!" Schanke felt furiously for a pulse. The ambulance would take too much time to get here, and Natalie didn't have time anymore. He couldn't find a heartbeat. "Damn it, Nat! You can't quit yet!"

"What's—" Nick hesitated, taking a step towards Schanke and Natalie, "what is it, Schanke?"

Schanke glanced up at his partner. Nick looked the worst Don had ever seen. He pressed Natalie's wrist, closing his eyes. *Please, Natalie. Don't leave us.*

* * *

Who was that? Natalie frowned, a voice echoing in her ears. She turned to look at Kerrie. Her friend had let go of her hand, and was drifting away from her.

You must choose, Kerrie said.

The choice is yours, Natalie, Aunt Beatrice nodded, smiling. *Remember, no regrets.*

Choose, Natalie, the others nodded, all smiling. The Light did not dim.

* * *

"Her heart is failing." Janette spoke softly, coming to stand close behind Schanke. "She is dying, Nicolah."

Nick winced at her words as if she had punched him. He would have walked away if Roland had not grabbed him. His cousin shook his arm, and made him face Natalie's body.

"Do something, Nicki. She's counting on you. She needs you." Roland hissed. "Now is not the time for one of your useless guilt trips."

Nick jerked his arm away from Roland. He walked to Natalie's body, and knelt down, taking up her free hand. She was so pale and cold. His closed his eyes a moment. What could he do for her? He was the one responsible for this. How could he make this right?

"She's lost too much blood. The ambulance won't make it," Schanke whispered. "I'm sorry, Nick. She meant a lot to me, too."

Nick's eyes met Schanke's. Don was already talking of Nat in the past tense. Nick set his jaw, wanting to yell, and knowing it wouldn't do any good. His eyes dropped back down to Natalie's lifeless form. Slowly, he lowered his head and kissed her brow.

"Natalie." He whispered so softly none of the others heard him.

* * *

Nick? Natalie glanced around. The Light was dimming. The people were gone. *Where was Nick?*

Memories came flooding back. The idiot probably blamed himself for what LaCroix had made him do. She was certainly going to give Nick a lecture!

Nick! she called out again.

* * *

"I felt it." Schanke looked startled. "Her heartbeat. It came back."

"Please—" Janette said, shaking her head.

Natalie's body spasmed. Janette jumped back in reflexive motion.

"Natalie!" Nick growled. "Come back to me!"

Her lips moved soundlessly. Her eyes moved underneath eyelids. Nick's grip on her hand tightened.

"Come on, Nat-baby!" Schanke cried, tears in his eyes, and a big smile on his face. "Come on!"

"Hello?" Someone called from outside the room. Roland rushed into the hall.

"Here!" he bellowed. "We are in here!"

"You called for an ambulance? We heard it on the radio. My friend and I just got off our shift from the hospital. He's a CB freak or we wouldn't have heard."

An older man, dressed in a green surgeon's top, followed Roland into the room.

Part 31

Amy Lynn Hull

The paramedic gasped as he saw Natalie, half of her blouse soaked with blood, her face a pasty pale, with Schanke still holding Nick's now blood-soaked sleeve to her neck.

In an instant he was at her side and rapidly donning his stethoscope to check for life, although it was obvious from his grim expression that he was not very hopeful about the outcome. When he took the cloth from Schanke's hand to peer at the ragged holes in the young woman's neck, his hurried manner faded and his shoulders sagged. He brushed Natalie's hair hastily away, and his fingers probed, searching for the non-existent proof of a heart still beating. Then he jumped back about three feet with a startled gasp.

The woman's eyes had suddenly snapped open, and were an almost-glowing shade of yellow. Schanke also gasped, but even he was not sure if it was from shock at seeing Nat or from surprise at being yanked across the room by Janette, who, Schanke had been certain, had been standing a good ten feet away from him only microseconds before. Roland likewise grabbed the second paramedic, who had just arrived with gear, and held him at bay, determined to prevent a complete bloodbath for which Nick would later blame himself bitterly.

The paramedic squealed softly as his arm was grabbed in a painfully tight grip. Then his eyes widened in terror as he looked up to see fangs descending in the mouth of this moving body which he had just determined to be dead. In an instant, he was pinned against a nearby wall, and those fangs were descending on his neck.

"Natalie, no!" Nick shouted. "Stop!"

She froze. "Let him go."

She immediately released her prey and backed off.

The paramedic ran for the door, but Roland grabbed his arm. "Schanke, come with me. We need to escort these gentlemen to their vehicle."

Schanke, mouth gaping, a blankly dumbfounded look still covering his face, followed mutely.

Janette watched them go, nodding. Roland would take care of the paramedics. She walked over to Nick, who was staring at Natalie in shock.

"Why...?" he breathed.

"Don't you see, Nicholas?" Janette questioned softly, watching his face closely but not touching him. "She is yours. She hears only your voice. She awakened in response to it, and she refrained from killing at its command. Watch—"

She turned to Natalie, who was still crouched near the wall, staring blankly at nothing, and said in a commanding tone, "Natalie, come here."

Turning back to Nick she raised an eyebrow. "See? Now you try it."

"No."

"Try it, Nicholas!" she ordered, her tone unyielding. "You need to know *exactly* where you stand in this situation."

"I will not play games with her life," Nick insisted.

"She doesn't have a *life* anymore! That has already been taken. And you *must* know what she does have because at this point, only you can reach her." Janette paused, regretting fleetingly the misery her words were eliciting before becoming annoyed again with Nick's refusal to face the obvious reality of the current situation. "Tell her now."

"Natalie, come here," Nick requested softly.

She immediately stood and walked toward Nick, stopping at his side.

Nick looked at her, his eyes full of a despairing grief. "Natalie, look at me," he said. The woman turned in his direction, but her eyes did not meet his, did not meet anything. Nick turned to go.

"I can't live with this," he said bitterly, starting for the door.

In a flash, Janette was standing in front of him, blocking his escape. "You cannot leave. You know that. She will go mad without you as an anchor. You cannot leave her like this."

"What choice do I have? I can't watch her be like this."

"You can end it here. You know that. But only you can do it; it is your right. And your *responsibility*."

"I can't."

"Would you abandon her like this? With her mind gone or trapped? Does your friendship mean so little? You alone have the power to end this non-existence for her, or to try and give her back herself."

"That's not possible," Nick growled. "You know that."

"I don't know it and neither do you. Neither of us ever stayed long enough to test that." Janette watched him carefully as the truth of her words, and the passing hope they offered, sank in. "Are you willing to leave and gamble that it would not have worked— without even trying?"

"This life is only death."

"Then offer her death!" Janette was close to losing her temper. His exasperating refusal to deal with fact, with the way things were, had worn out her patience with him. "Either choose for her, break her neck, and offer her death— final, irreversible death— or attempt to help her join us and allow her to choose life or death. But you cannot leave her this way. Like this she is neither alive nor dead, neither one of Us nor one of Them."

Janette took a deep, artificial, calming breath, quieted her voice, and finished, "Give Natalie the chance to avoid this... partial existence. She deserves that much."

"I know," Nick said. He stepped back to Natalie and reached for her...

Part 32

Valery King

Pulling his shirt open, Nick drew Natalie toward him. His hand shook as he reached up to open a vein, to give her the gift of his blood and bring her over into his life.

"No!" he shouted suddenly, grabbing Natalie's shoulders and thrusting her back from him, but not releasing her. "I won't accept this! Do you hear me, LaCroix? There has to be some other choice!"

"Nicholas!" Janette cried. "You cannot leave her in this state."

Nick turned on Janette, and she recoiled at the intensity of the pain and determination in his eyes. "I will not leave her like this. But I will not kill her, and I will not bring her over."

"There is no other option."

"I think there is," he told her, with a deadly tone. "You have always scoffed at my attempts to come back over, Janette. No one has ever come back, you said. It is impossible.

"But Nat believes there is a way. She believes it passionately. And so do I. And faith, it is said, has the power to move mountains."

Turning back to Nat, he gazed down into the blank eyes. "Something in her responds to me, Janette. Part of her hears me. And I do not, cannot, believe that it is simply because I am the one who did this to her. I need to go deeper, to find the human part of her, to get the essence of the woman to listen. To get *all* that is Natalie to hear me, and convince her to come back."

"It has never been done, Nicholas," Janette warned.

He smiled, a bit sadly. "It has never been tried, Janette." Swinging Natalie up into his arms, he was suddenly gone.

Part 33

Margaret Newman

At first, Nick hesitated over where he could take Natalie. What would be the best place to do what he needed to do? He flew aimlessly over the dusky Montreal skyline for a while until he suddenly remembered the Rose Garden.

Natalie always mentioned it— it was a place she had gone to on a previous trip here. She had even sent him a postcard, the scent of roses heavy on the paper, nearly burning his hand.

Within minutes, he was setting his fragile cargo down on the grass amidst rose bushes. The night was crisp, but did not deter the roses from filling the air with their fragrance. He winced against the pain they caused him, but it was nothing near the pain he felt when he looked down at the woman in his arms.

Natalie had closed her eyes, lying limply in Nick's arms as they had flown. Now she half sat in his lap as he desperately tried to figure out what to do. He brushed hair out of her face, his fingertips tracing her eyebrows. Emotions held back nearly overwhelmed him as he gazed down at her. When he could stand it no longer, he lifted his head towards the newly-risen moon and cried out in anguish.

"Please, God, not Natalie! Do not make her suffer as I have!" His head fell, his vision blurry. A gentle, timid touch of a hand on his arm.

"Nick?" croaked Natalie. "Nick, what's going on?"

"Natalie?" He blinked, clearing his vision. She looked up at him uncertainly. Her eyes still glowed with a yellow light, but it had dulled. The fangs had retracted.

"I feel so strange. So weak." She blinked, licking her lips. "So hungry."

"Something terrible happened. A mistake, and now we must correct it." A brief, fiery spark of hope burst into life in Nick's chest. He held her head with one hand, making certain she could not break his gaze. He forced himself into her mind, down into her thoughts. He searched for the very essence of her being, the core of Natalie Lambert. *Natalie, where are you?*

There, a stirring. Like a rose that was withering, her soul was slowly fading away. This part of Natalie, remembering Nick still, drifted toward him. *Natalie,* he whispered. *You can't leave, you can't give up.*

I am so tired, the soul responded slowly. *I just want to sleep.*

That's not the Natalie I know. Since when did you start giving in so easily? he challenged.

I don't care. Sleep. The soul took a long time to reply.

What would you say if I told you I was going back to LaCroix? Everything I did in trying to become mortal was a waste of time. He growled. *A waste of my time. You betrayed me. You used me. And what do I get now? 'I'm tired, I don't care'.*

It wasn't a waste. A slight spark.

A total waste. You made promises to me that you can't keep. I'm going back to LaCroix. He was right. Mortals are weak. Mortals are stupid animals. He could feel a change coming over her. He appreciated her temper more than ever before. *Those damn treatments you gave me— they were a lie. A joke. Did you have a good laugh?*

"Not a lie," Natalie gasped out loud. She struggled vainly in Nick's arms. "I never laughed at you. I always, only wanted to help you."

"If you can't help yourself, how can you help me?" he asked, clasping her in a mighty embrace. He wanted to shout with joy.

"Nick," Natalie squeaked. "You're squishing me."

He eased his hold, and looked down into her pale face. Her eyes gazed back up at him, the yellow light gone, but the light of life was bright and clear. She was pale and weak, with blood crusted on her neck, and her blouse was ruined. She was giving him one of those determined looks which usually boded ill for him.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you eat a garlic pill or two. Just on general principles." Nick grinned.

* * *

⚠ *EDITORIAL INTRUSION: So now we're close to the end, and what happens? There is some dispute about how it should be ended. Should Natalie die? remain a zombie? get brought back to her humanity? Or should her ultimate fate be left a mystery? All this was postulated, and it was suggested than any participant who wanted to should write her/his own ending and we could all choose. Two endings were posted; they were written independently from each other, and the consensus was to let them both stand. Since mine was posted first to the list, it is printed here first. [vk]*

Part 34A: *Ending #1*

Valery King

The phone in Roland's heavily-draped study shrilled. Though Schanke was closest to the desk he did not have the inhuman speed of his host, so Roland was the one who picked up the receiver. Schanke and Janette hovered close.

"Nick? Nicholas? Dammit, are you all right? Where are you?"

"The hospital," Nick answered, and Roland had a hard time interpreting the tone of his voice. It was tired, certainly, but also— triumphant? "They're just finishing up the transfusions now."

Janette, impatiently, hit the button to put the phone on speaker. "Say that again, Nicholah? Did you say—"

They heard Nick laugh, and now the triumph was unmistakable. "She's alive, Janette. And— human. Very weak, of course, but she'll make it."

It took a great deal, after more than 800 years of existence, to amaze Roland and Janette, but this did it. Schanke, in his own amazed and joyful relief, laughed at the expressions on their faces.

"That's great! That's really great! I knew you could do it, partner."

There was a silence from the other end for a long moment, and when he spoke again Nick's tone was hesitant. "Uh, Schank. I wanted to, well, to thank you for coming to the rescue so quickly. Even when you found out— what I am. It was—"

Schanke interrupted. "Hey, don't mention it, Nick," he said, embarrassed and uncomfortable. "That's what a partner's for."

"We need to talk, Don," Nick said, the seriousness of the statement underlined by his use of his partner's first name. He'd never done that before, and that shook Schanke almost more than his new knowledge about his partner.

"Uh, yeah, I guess we do. Look, I rescued your Caddy from that place you were locked up. Why don't I, um, come down to the hospital and pick you up."

Janette hissed. "Detective! It is broad daylight!"

"I assume that's what the Caddy's for," Schanke replied. "Largest trunk of any car made within the last thirty years, I seem to recall being told by a certain vampire homicide cop. And there can't be many places in that hospital away from the windows that Nick can hang out."

They heard Nick's sigh. "True. Fortunately portions of Emergency are close to the central core, so I'm safe for the moment. But when they take Nat to her ward they're going to want me out of here."

"And you, *mon cher,* how are you?" Janette asked softly.

"I'm okay. Still— hungry, but I can deal with it for a little while. Nat insisted that I 'liberate' a few pints from the blood bank myself, but it isn't enough. Perhaps Schank could bring something from Roland's pantry..."

"No sweat, pal. I've got a cooler full of Janette's private stock already in the car."

"Good." Again, they sensed a hesitation. "Janette. What about— LaCroix?"

"He has disappeared, Nicholah. I think he has conceded you this round. I do not sense him close by."

"And Daniel?"

Roland laughed bitterly. "Also gone. He was not in the cell I stuck him in at the mansion. He is probably with LaCroix. I do not think we have heard the end of him."

"No. But I worry about him, with LaCroix. Daniel is not evil, Roland. But LaCroix will do his best to change that. Look, Roland, I have another request. Could I borrow a shirt?"

Nick's cousin again laughed lightheartedly, as much in relief as amusement. "My wardrobe is at your disposal."

"I have to go. They're about to take Nat upstairs. Please hurry, Schanke."

* * *

Nick hung up the phone and rushed back into the emergency room. He had heard the call unmistakably. Nat, swimming up from unconsciousness to find herself in the stark, sterile, colorless environment, finding him gone, crying out his name in alarm.

But she had not cried aloud.

The ER nurse was calming her as the technician removed the transfusion apparatus. It had just been the sudden shock of awakening that had caused her alarm and Nat was now relaxing, but Nick hurried to her side anyway, taking her hand. She gripped him as strongly as she could, but in her weakened state that was not very strong. The nurse stepped back out of earshot, smiling.

"You were gone," Natalie said.

"Not far. Never very far." He smoothed her hair back with his free hand, looking deeply into her eyes. "Can you feel it, Nat?" *Can you hear me?*

! He sensed her amazement. *There's— something there, some— link? What is this, Nick?*

I don't quite understand it myself. "It appears similar to the link between a master vampire and a new fledgling." He felt her instinctive panic and sent a wave of reassurance. *Calmly, calmly.*

"But you're still human, Nat. Don't doubt that. And I don't sense any kind of domination in this link. There is no master, no slave." He laughed. "You're a strong personality. That's what saved you, I think. I couldn't dominate you even if I wished it."

"You'd better not try," she responded, with a spark of her old spirit. Then seeing the remorse in his eyes she became suddenly serious. "No, Nick. I don't want you beating yourself up over anything that's happened. I don't blame you for any of it."

"I don't see how you can not. Natalie, if it weren't for this— miracle— you'd be dead. Or worse. And I would have been responsible."

"Damn it, Nick! You *aren't* responsible!" She was growing visibly agitated, which worried him. "This is one of your most annoying traits, do you know that? Trying to take the blame for everything! If I can forgive you, why can't you forgive yourself?"

The nurse stepped quickly forward. "Detective Knight, this much excitement is bad for Dr. Lambert. They're getting ready to take her upstairs; perhaps you should leave."

Natalie gripped his hand tighter. *No! Stay, please.*

"She's right, Nat. You have to rest." *It's all right, you're safe. I'm safe. Rest.* "Schanke's coming pretty soon, with a change of clothes for me, and some... food. I'll be back tonight; perhaps they'll let you leave, and I'll take you home."

She sighed, and loosened her grip. "All right." *If you're sure you're safe.*

I'm sure. Rest now.

And it isn't your fault!

* * *

Schanke found him in the hospital's underground garage, leaning wearily against the wall next to the elevator.

"You look like you've been through a threshing machine, partner," he said, handing Nick the shirt Roland had sent and getting back into the car.

After he'd stripped off the ruined shirt and donned Roland's fine linen one, Nick joined him. Schanke's words were characteristic enough, but Nick sensed a deep uneasiness in his partner that disturbed him.

That the human refused to look at Nick as he quickly downed the contents of several bottles from the cooler was even more disturbing.

"So," Schanke said, "this character LaCroix— has he just given up, then? What's he got against you, anyway?"

"It's complicated. He hasn't given up; he's only pulled back for the present. I'll encounter him again." Nick looked seriously at Schanke. "Don— This new awareness you have of me, of Janette and Roland. Can you deal with it?"

"Oh, sure, no problem. It explains a lot of little things about you that have bothered me for a long time, you know. I'm glad to have the mysteries solved at last." This was obviously bravado. The uneasiness was plainly evident behind the detective's cheerful tone.

"You don't have to," Nick told him gently. "I can help you to forget."

Schanke seemed to deflate at these words. This was the truth he was about to hear, Nick knew. "Yeah. You've done that before, haven't you? It's just, it's all too weird, you know? I mean, I *know* you're one of the good guys and everything, but what you obviously *are* is something I don't think I'm able to accept. Dammit, Nick, I don't *believe* in vampires!"

"Though I think you trust me."

"Sure, I trust you. Hell, you're my partner and you've gotta trust your partner or you're in real trouble." He took a deep breath. "I trust *who* you are, Nick. But I can't trust *what* you are. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I understand."

"I want to trust you, Nick. You're one of the best partners a cop could have."

"Then trust me, Don," Nick told him, locking his gaze with Schanke's, turning his full will upon him. "There are no such things as vampires."

Schanke's face held no expression. "No, of course not."

"I was held captive by a man with a grudge against me; that man caught and hurt Natalie, but you got to us in time. You saved us. Do you understand?"

Schanke gazed back blankly into Nick's eyes. "Uh-huh. I got to you in time and saved you."

"Just you, Schank. With a tip from Janette, you found me and Nat and rescued us."

"Right. Just me."

"Just you." Nick released Schanke and sank wearily back against the passenger seat.

Don shook his head, as if waking up from an unexpected nap.

"Hey, that's great news about Nat," he said. "Guess we'd better find a phone and check in with Stonetree, and find someplace for you to avoid the sunlight, until the medical types release her and we can take her home. You know, that has *got* to be the most inconvenient allergy a man can have, Nick. The tricks our genes play on us sometimes! And I'm gonna need a little shut-eye before we try driving back to Toronto. How 'bout you?"

Nick smiled. "Yeah, I could use some sleep. It's been a long night."

— The End —

Part 34B: *Ending #2*

Veronica McKnight

"Nick!" Natalie squeaked. "You're squishing me."

He eased his hold, and looked down into her pale face. Her eyes gazed back up at him, the yellow light gone, but the light of life was bright and clear. She was pale and weak, blood crusted on her neck, and her blouse was ruined. She was giving him one of those determined looks which usually boded ill for him.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you eat a garlic pill or two. Just on general principals." Nick grinned.

* * *

Natalie started to grin back; but a look of panic replaced that expression as she realized her fangs were starting to descend again. Nick clenched her to him desperately, not wanting to believe what was happening.

"No, Nat. . ." he spoke softly in a choking whisper, "You must fight it! Fight it!"

In his arms her body went slack. Laying his tender cargo gently on the grass again, he lowered his head and wept. He wept with the force of all the guilt and sorrow he'd ever felt, for all the sins he'd ever committed. He mourned Nat's soul; and he mourned every soul he'd ever touched in an unkind way, every soul he'd ever violated. He mourned his own soul, a soul that had been locked away in an abyss of despair until *she'd* found him.

"Nicky?"

From far away, a familiar voice called across the abyss to him. A boy's voice. He shook his head. He did not want to be called back. He would go with Natalie into the oblivion of death.

"Nicky, I can't come no closer." The familiar voice held an edge of pain in it. "It's the roses, Nicky. They hurt."

The beast within Nick growled angrily. *Leave me be.* No one would disturb him now; NO ONE. He snarled toward the general direction of the voice. Then he gathered Nat into his arms, and headed deeper into the Rose Garden.

"Wait! Nicky!"

He ignored the voice, and he ignored the tight prickling of his skin as he sought out a cave-like opening under the most huge rosebush growing at the central thicket of the garden. The roses shown with a blood-red color, almost black in the silvery moonlight. Their scent permeated the night air heavily; he drank of their sweet fragrance and was satisfied. It was a good place to die.

Softly, he lay Nat's body in the grotto and knelt to pray beside her. The prayer he had been taught so long ago by his teacher in the knightly arts came back to him, whole and strong.

"Dear Lord," he spoke the words clearly. They sprang from his heart like deer, leaping. He ended his prayer with, "My sins I have confessed to You. I am truly sorry for what I have done, and I commend myself into Your care." He looked down at Nat's now-peaceful face and added, "And I ask humbly that You take this child of Yours to heaven in my place, my place that I forsook so long ago. As for myself, I am at Your mercy. Do with me what You will."

Then he lay down beside her and closed his eyes. The scent of the roses seemed to beckon him down deep, deeper inside himself. He followed its signal, spiralling within. He was abandoning everything he had known, everything that was ever important to him. Everything except one thing. His friend. Natalie.

He found himself walking down a long arching corridor. The arches were made of rose brambles which closed in above him, tunnel-like. He looked down at himself and noticed he was wearing a long black robe. Beyond, he discerned a pink, rosy-colored light. Moving closer to it, he found that the light took on human, womanly proproportions. The woman was robed in pink, and reached out her graceful hand to him. When he took hold of it, he saw who she was. Natalie.

She looked into his eyes now and smiled. "So you were going to feed me garlic pills, were you?" she asked him wryly. They both laughed. Holding hands, they walked down the corridor together.

Music. It seemed that the scent of roses had changed into the most poignantly beautiful music. And up ahead another light manifested... a golden light so pure and full of beauty, it brought tears to Nick's eyes, but this time, tears of joy. It radiated a sense of warmth and safety; Nat moved toward it as eagerly as he did.

Gradually, the glow shaped itself into a figure. Nick almost went down on his knees in recognition of the white-robed, white-bearded noble man. He somehow recognized the Templar Grand Master who was rumored to guide the Knights of the Temple from the Inner Planes. In his hand, the white-robed man held an abacus, the Master Builder's staff.

"Well-met, long-lost brother," the Master said in a resonant voice. "Be welcome in the Light."

"How can you welcome me?" Nick asked, wrinkling his brow in sudden consternation.

"Ah." The Master smiled. "I've been watching your progress. You've come a great distance, brother." He nodded reassuringly. "What would you ask of me?"

Nick sighed, and explained all that had happened to bring them to this place, what he had done, and why.

The Master addressed Natalie. "Come forward, my dear."

At Nick's questioning glance, she nodded. He let go of her hand and she went forth.

"For the third time, you are given a choice," said the Grand Master to her. "But this time you must decide what you want for yourself... not for anybody else." He gestured slightly with his abacus toward Nick. Then his eyes became intensely focused on Natalie again. "Will you come into the Light now, or will you choose to return to the Earth-plane?"

As Nick watched, a change came over Natalie. Her image blinked out for a moment, and then returned, sparkling. She looked into the fiery eyes of the Master and said, "My work is not yet done. I have so much more learning to do, so much more living to experience. I choose to return to the Earth-plane."

The Master seemed to relax a bit. "You have chosen wisely. You, too, possess the knightly spirit."

Beaming, Nat turned and again took her place beside Nick.

The Grand Master turned his bright gaze to the knight garbed in black. "Remember the words of the founder of our Order," he said. "'This is the difference between the damned and the saved: Everyone except the damned gets up and stumbles on.'"

The Light crackled like lightning, and Nick's head swam with a swirling vertigo, coming to rest with a psychic jolt. He was lying by Nat's side on the grass, under the rose bush again. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her face. Her eyes opened, lucid and steady. Her skin was no longer pale. She reached up her hand and caressed his cheek.

A swift breeze shook the rosebush and a drop of dew detached itself from a rose and dropped upon Nat's lips. She laughed and licked it away. "Mmmmm," she said, testing her voice gingerly, "I think I want some water."

"Come on," Nick helped her to her feet. Leaning on him, she was able to walk, and they headed for the fountain at the perimeter of the rose garden.

Daniel was waiting there, sitting on the fountain, dangling his legs over the edge.

Nick made sure Nat got a long draught of water, then he turned to the boy. "Hello, Daniel."

"I was hopin' you'd come back, Nicky."

"Thanks for your good thoughts." Nick smiled at him and tousled his hair.

"She seems like she'll make it, eh?"

"Yes." Nick beamed at Natalie with heartfelt joy. She sighed happily and scooped up a little more water from the fountain, splashing him playfully.

"Well, I guess that you won't be needin' this, then." Daniel held out a small vial that looked as if it were made of alabaster.

"What's that, Daniel?" Nick asked almost absently as he splashed Nat back.

"It's a recipe from that *Abarat* book."

"*What?*" Nick's interest was instantly riveted on the vial.

"You know, that book *he* burned because you wanted it." Daniel giggled maliciously. "*He* used to read to me from it, like bedtime stories. *He* used to laugh and laugh at it." Daniel's gaze turned serious. "I found that I've got quite a memory for that sort of thing, Nicky. Do you think I could attend the university some day?"

"Well, maybe, Daniel." Nick found himself reaching for the vial. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It's the cure, Nicky. It's called 'an elixir', made of a special emerald, pulverized... and a mushroom that only grows on the top of some mountain in the Himalayas once in a hundred years. *He* found them both because he wanted to tease you with them. I ground them up together, like the recipe said. Only one thing, though, Nicky."

Nick's fingers hesitated before closing on the vial. "What's that?"

"It's gotta be fed to you by the one who loves you best." Daniel winked over at Natalie.

Nat seemed to be thinking. "I don't need it anymore, Nick." She smiled. "*You* take it."

Nick felt his heart racing with the possibility of attaining full humanity again. Daniel was handing him the vial and he was taking it. Natalie would feed it to him...

"NOT SO FAST, NICHOLAS." In the space, LaCroix had appeared. Before they could register his presence, he had whisked the vial out of their hands.

"LaCroix! You have gone too far this time. Stop it. Now." Was it Janette's voice? A voice rich and full of its familiar melody, but with a new note of authority in it, echoing from the surrounding darkness. But where was she?

"Nicky! Go back to the roses!" Daniel yelled as he sprinted just past LaCroix's grasp and toward the sound of Janette's voice.

Nick grabbed Nat's shoulders and pulled her over to first tier of rosebushes. Crouching down, they watched as LaCroix made to follow them, and then hesitated in a gesture of angry frustration. The tall, evil-looking vampire frowned, obviously unable to approach the rosebushes. His spiked hair seemed to bristle as he clenched his fist. After a second, though, he relaxed and leered at them.

"I'm sorry, Nicholas," he said in an overly silky tone. "Perhaps I acted... a bit too hastily." He waved the vial in the air. "Here is your elixir. But it is *I* who must feed it to you... don't you see?"

Nick swallowed, unsure of the mix of emotions that surged through him. He took one look at Nat, crouching next to him, and knew what it was he felt.

"LaCroix, you are pathetic," he called to the one who had originally brought him across, so many centuries ago. "Keep the elixir. I'll find my own way."

LaCroix yelled in defeat, a wordless howl that swirled through the darkness, palpable and poisonous. Then he whirled around toward the trees in the distance, shouting for Daniel.

"Here I am, sir." Daniel walked out of the dark, into the moonlight.

"And here *I* am, LaCroix." Janette was standing next to the boy, her hand upon his shoulder. Her chin was set in defiance.

LaCroix smiled sardonically. "So, my black dove, you've decided to come back to me at last, eh? You know it's where you've always belonged." He opened one arm as if to invite her into it.

Janette gave her head a tart shake. "No, *cher*. I have finally decided to do what *I* want to do, instead of just running, running from you."

She also raised her hand, but it was no invitation. At her signal, several other figures parted themselves from the surrounding darkness and stepped into the silvery light of the moon. There was Roland, and Alma, and all of the immortal regulars of her Raven nightclub.

"What! You'd rather stay with this rabble?" LaCroix's mocking laughter became warped, metallic. Then, abruptly, he drew himself up to his full height. "Janette... *cherie*... I always gave you credit for better taste than that!"

Suavely he slipped the alabaster vial into his jacket pocket. He sighed, heavily. "You are all so boring these days." Then he smiled, as if he were keeping a mad secret. "But I *do* have further amusements planned." Laughing again, he levitated into the air. In an instant, he was gone.

Janette shivered. Bending down, she gave Daniel a hug. "Thanks, Princess," he said to her, and she playfully wagged a finger at him.

"None of that, now, Daniel, if you are to live with me."

"Do you really mean it, Janette?" Daniel seemed overjoyed.

"*Oui, cher.*" She gave him a kiss on the cheek and took his hand. Together they walked just to the edge of the rose garden, to the fountain. Nick and Nat emerged from the bushes to join them.

It was a long time before any of them spoke. Janette was studying Natalie, obviously overwhelmed by her healthy condition. "I can't believe it," the dark woman said finally, reaching over and pinching Nat's cheek.

"What is it about the roses?" Nick asked, after they all shared a laugh.

Daniel hiked himself up to sit between them. "I've studied about that, too, Nicky. Seems that those of us who've given up human blood become... uhhh... immune to the roses. LaCroix was affected the most, though, because he's the oldest of us all."

"Hmmm." Nick pondered that. "You know, Daniel, perhaps we MAY be able to enroll you in the university after all."

"Pizza Delivery!" It was Schanke's voice! Nick rubbed his eyes as his partner came loping out of the darkness with a large flat box in one hand, and a bottle of what looked like orange juice in the other. "No garlic!"

"Schanke!"

"Yeah, well I was in the neighborhood... and Knight, you and me have to have a long talk."

"Why, Schank?"

Natalie was already helping herself to the food and drink Schanke had deposited on the rim of the fountain. "Yes," she said between a sip and a bite, "Why?"

"Partner," Schanke put his hands on his hips and cocked his head at Nick, "I just can't believe there's such things as vampires."

"You can't?"

"Nope."

"I guess you're right. You can't."

"I knew you guys were just putting me on."

"You knew it."

"What are we going to tell the Captain?"

Nick thought for a moment. "I had a family emergency. Nat tried to help me out with it."

Schanke sighed. "Boy. Families."

"Yeah." Nick knew he'd have to help Schanke erase the memories later; but for now he just enjoyed sitting here in the garden with his friends.

Deep in his heart, a resonant voice spoke, a voice he remembered vividly, the Grand Master's voice, quoting St. Paul: "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all die, but we shall all be changed."

Nick remembered, suddenly, the Rose Window above the North Door of Chartres Cathedral. He remembered that it was called The Door of the Initiates. Again the Grand Master's voice spoke, from within him, now quoting Solomon's *Song of Songs*: "I am black, but I am beautiful."

Across from the fountain, the roses shimmered darkly in the moonlight. Nick spoke his last memory aloud...

It was from a poem that he'd heard in the Saracen lands during the Crusades, a poem by Rabia el-Adawia. "True devotion is for itself; not to desire heaven nor to fear hell."

— The End —

⚠ *ANOTHER EDITOR INTRUSION: Well, there you have it. This experience has led me to conclude (again!) that posting fiction on a computer network list is very different than any other kind of collaborative fictional experience. Space doesn't permit us to include the many lively exchanges that went into the execution of this story, but I have a file full of about forty messages discussing this effort, and not an acrimonious one in the whole group! While I had some reservations about whether or not this would work when Valerie started it, before long I was convinced, and it turned into a very enjoyable experience. We all hope you found it enjoyable as well. —Valery King*

[and now, a word from our sponsors...]

Public Service Commercial: BATtv
by Margaret Newman

Det. Nick Knight crosses the street towards the scene of an accident. He shakes his head as the ambulance driver lifts the body onto the stretcher. He walks towards the camera—

"Hello, my name is Nick Knight, and I'm a detective with the Toronto Metropolitan Police Force. Accidents like these can be avoided. If that man had worn a helmet while flying, he could be walking away from this. Unfortunately, he will have to stay in the hospital for a few nights until he recovers."

He looks sad as the ambulance pulls away. "Remember this, it might not look cool to wear a helmet while flying across the city, but it certainly will save you time and pain if you miss a turn."

A plainclothes policeman tosses him a helmet.

"Thanks." Nick nods to the officer. Donning the helmet, he looks back to the camera. "Fly safely." He flies off.

Immortality is no excuse for a headache? Or bad flying?

Which Side?

by Don Bassingthwaite

The following Forever Knight vignette was posted in response to a discussion on the FORKNI-L list as to which side of the neck vampires bite. Don Bassingthwaite replied with the following answer, and one of his infamous Forever Knight *parodies.*

Don wrote: Sorry if this has already come up as an answer to "Which side does a vampire bite on," but has one of the most stupefyingly mundane answers come up yet...?

Which side gives the better camera angle?

Flashback: What Really Happened to the Civil War Photographer in "Unreality TV"...

He turned at the sudden noise. "Hello?" he called. "Is someone there?"

When there was no response, he turned back to the photos he had taken a few days before. A man flying! It was astonishing, even if the doctor seemed to think otherwise. When he got these back to the papers up North, he would...

Without warning, a hand with a grip like iron grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. The photographer found himself dangling in the air, held up by a terrifying creature, a creature that looked like a man but with horrible, glowing eyes and immense fangs. Another creature looked on. The flying man he had photographed looked on, eyes cold yet somehow terrified.

With a snarl, the creature drew him closer to those awful fangs. The creature's breath was terrible, like rotting flesh and old blood. He tried to struggle but it was no use. Closer and closer he was drawn, as helpless as an insect, until he could feel cold breath against his skin and fangs brushed his neck.

"Hold on! Hold on!" snapped the other creature peevishly, "You're blocking the view. Bite him on the other side of the neck so we can see!"

With a sour look, the creature shifted its grip on the photographer. "Better?" it asked sarcastically.

"Much."

"This..." mumbled the photographer weakly, "...this is your better side, too."

"You really think so?" The creature turned its head so he could compare the two sides.

"Definitely." Fumbling, he drew a card from his pocket. "I have a friend in California. He's in the movie business— give him a call."

"Thanks!"

"Don't mention it." The photographer shrieked as the creature's fangs once more descended to his throat...

— The End —

All That's Best of Dark and Bright

by Susan M. Garrett

Part 1: In which Janette receives two visitors

Janette leaned against the cool steel of the rear door to the Raven, one finger toying with her choker absently. Beneath her breath, she hissed, "Nicola, what *is* keeping you?"

A quick sip from the glass held in her other hand helped break the monotony of the seconds, but it did nothing to ease her annoyance. Over the centuries, only that one emotion seemed able to come to her unbidden. *Everything* seemed to irritate her. The nights dragged one into another, unchanging. And the occasional flirtation with danger or with something new passed too quickly.

She saw him, then, struggling down the alleyway, supporting someone hidden from her view. "You are beginning to try my patience," she scolded, standing aside as he hustled the newcomer through the doorway.

He flashed her a brief smile and she relented, although she let the door slam shut behind her as she followed them inside. Nicola looked back at the sound of the door with a raised eyebrow and she echoed his smile. It was good that he know she was annoyed.

"If you must pursue these foolish fantasies of becoming mortal, I can't stop you," Janette said, as his back came between her and his companion. "But I do *not* appreciate the disruption of my business—"

"Your friend here, was about to put a serious dent into one of your mortal 'guests'." Nicola turned to face her. "I was only doing your bouncer the favor of getting him out before things escalated into something you couldn't handle."

"I can handle anything." Sweeping past him, Janette, got her first look at the vampire who had caused such a fuss at the club entrance ... and her cold blood ran colder, freezing in her veins.

If he had fed within a fortnight, it would have been a miracle. His skin was like parchment, pale and taut over the skull beneath, his eyes fever bright and shining so in the dim light that she forced herself to turn away. "He's none of mine," she whispered, taking a step that placed Nicola between her and this skeletal vampire. "I've never seen him before. But he can have all he needs ... on the house."

"No—" The whispered hiss came from the dry lips of the vampire, who slumped forward in the chair in which Nicola had placed him. She peered cautious around Nicola's wide shoulders.

"Who are you?" asked Nicola earnestly, leaning down to meet the eyes of the starving vampire. "If you need to feed—"

One of the vampire's hands clamped onto Nicola's suit jacket and he seemed as if he were going to pull himself to his feet. "The light," he whispered, staring at Nicola, then at Janette. "Blood burns ... in the light."

His eyes went wider at he stared at her and Janette realized that he was staring at the glass of blood mixed with wine. After glancing at Nicola, she cautiously offered the glass to the visitor.

The vampire threw his head back and a low moan rose from his throat, a sound that shook her to the bones. His hand left Nicola's jacket, snapping out to wrest the glass from her fingers so quickly that even she had difficulty following the movement. She held her hand to her chest, the other reaching up again to toy with her choker, and she met Nicola's eyes again.

He, too, seemed puzzled, for the vampire didn't drink at once. He held the glass, his eyes burning yellow, then red, as he sniffed at the rim. As if reluctant to drink, it seemed that he would throw the glass aside and Nicola even moved to reach for it.

But then there was a sigh. The sound was not frightening like the last, but filled with such sadness that Janette thought his heart might burst. He raised the glass to them, as if in a toast, then downed the blood.

Nicola kept his eyes on the visitor. "Janette, I think we'll need more than a single glass."

"I can ring for it," she said, moving to a buzzer on the wall that would summon the bouncer.

"I think *you* should get it."

Janette stopped where she stood and whirled to face him, pulling herself to her full height. *He* was sending *her* away. And in her own club! "Nicola, you presume—!"

There was a choking sound from the vampire in the chair as he fell forward to the floor, resting on his knees. Nicola leaned to pick him up, but the vampire planted one hand on his chest, shoving him away so that he fell backward into some boxes that were piled against the wall. Shaking, the vampire began to crawl on his hands and knees toward her, his red eyes fixing her with a desperate glare. "The blood burns," he whispered, in a voice so low she could barely hear the words.

Smoke rose from his body and she backed away, calling, "Nicola?" The pitch of her voice rose to a scream as the vampire suddenly burst into flames. Tongues of fire licked the ceiling. The wisps of smoke became thick and black, accompanied by the acrid smell of burning, dead flesh.

Something heavy and metal was pushed into her hands and she almost dropped it, then realized that the hissing she heard was Nicola using the fire extinguisher required by city ordinance. Making a mental apology to the young fire inspector who had unknowingly come close to losing his life over his insistence on such petty details, Janette found that Nicola had already loosened the catch— the foam spurted out.

The fumes and foam tickled her nostrils for a moment, but, being a vampire, breathing was not a matter of survival. Janette fought against the kick of the metal cylinder and kept spraying, hating and fearing the flames that dared invade her club.

It was only when Nicola placed a firm hand on her shoulder and wrested away the extinguisher that she stopped. Collapsing against the comforting solidity of the wall, she stared at the pile of foam-covered ash on the floor and shivered.

Nicola's hand was still on her shoulder. Dropping the extinguisher to the floor, he pulled her into his arms and murmured, "It's all right, *petite*. It's out. The fire's gone."

For a moment she stood there, shivering. He knew how she felt about fire, how the fear of it was enough to freeze her in place. The very thought of the flames made her cold inside and he, like she, lacked warmth.

So Janette turned to her anger, letting that warm her as she pushed him away and gestured down at her dress. "Look at this. And my club. I have deliveries tomorrow night— this will not be ready in time. What will you do about it?"

"Me?" Nicola's temper flared for an instant, but then he smiled ... that insufferable, understanding smile. He knew her too well. After so many centuries, he knew all of her moods and her methods. "I think one of your fledglings should be willing to do some heavy work in exchange for room and board." Then he squatted down, his fingertip reaching for, but not touching, the foam. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Spontaneous combustion," answered Janette, circling so that she entered his line of sight. She wasn't about to be dismissed so quickly. "We've heard stories ..."

"But *only* stories. Nothing burns that quickly. Or that hot." He looked up and she followed his gaze, to where the lick of the flames left black stripes across her ceiling. "You didn't know him. I didn't know him. But someone must have."

"You're going to *investigate* this, aren't you?"

Her acid tone caused him to smile. "I think I should, don't you? After all, it happened to one of *us*." His gaze dropped back to the ash. "It's my night off. I'll ask Natalie—"

"It's *our* concern." But then he fixed her with those eyes and she backed off, reaching for her choker again and pouting as she turned away. "All right," she relented. "But ... not here. Have someone pack that," Janette gestured toward the remains, "up for you." She shivered again and suddenly he was standing behind her— she could feel his presence.

"You'll be all right?" he asked.

A smile came to her lips and she almost shook her head. Always the knight errant, coming to the aid of a lady in distress. But it wouldn't be well to let him know how much this incident had disturbed her. Turning, she placed her hand against his chest and pushed him away, walking toward the doorway that led to the back of the bar, but giving the ash and foam a wide berth. "I am always 'all right,' Nicola." Over her shoulder, she gave him a smile. "*You* have never made any complaints."

Once the door was closed behind her, she rested against it, taking a deep breath that her body didn't need but which her composure required. How horrible that she complain of sameness! It was the way of fate, to drop something like this into her lap, not only shattering her nerves, but occupying Nicola. Now, no matter what game she enticed him with, his mind would be wound around this new mystery. Ever the *inspector*, her Nicola.

The bead curtain parted and Alma was there. There was an instant of scrutiny, an accounting of the ruin of her dress and hair, and a smirk from the fledgling vampiress.

Gathering her dignity around her, Janette pinned Alma with her gaze, until the smirk faded and the younger vampiress was forced to avert her eyes. "There's been an accident," she stated flatly. "Send Tyler to clean up the mess— he should talk to Nicola. Arrange for two new fire extinguishers. And have that damn sprinkler system in the front connected to the rear of the club."

At even the hint of the word 'fire,' Alma's lips drew taut. She nodded. "Tyler is... between conquests. He'll take care of it right away. But— there's someone here to see you. At least, he's asked to meet the owner of the club." When Janette raised her eyebrow, Alma added, "He's one of us. And he's a hunk."

Intrigued, Janette ran over a quick mental list of anyone of their kind who could fit that description and would be in the area, but was stymied. "Did he say he was an old friend?"

Alma shook her head and handed her a business card. "No. He said he was calling to pay his respects."

"You should have said that at once, you foolish girl!" she chided. A glance at the card told her nothing— Gregory Mercer, Imports/Exports. The paper was fine, the print elegant in its simplicity. This had promise.

Then Janette remembered that she was covered with foam.

"*Merde,*" She turned toward the door to her rooms and office. "Show him to my office. I'll be with him in a few minutes."

"As long as that?"

A snarl sent Alma scurrying through the beaded curtain. Janette wasted no time, turning to the doorway that led to her rooms. Once there, she ran behind an oriental changing screen and slipped out of her dress. Stepping into another dress, a black sheath with silver lacings, she quickly dressed. Her shoes were tossed aside as a loss, replaced immediately by black satin pumps with silver trim and stiletto heels. A brush passed through her hair set everything in place. She knew she looked like she meant business.

He was waiting in her office, admiring an art deco print framed on the far wall. Her first assessment was that he had some money, but not enough to afford the expensive cloth that made wearing clothing bearable to their heightened senses. The suit was tailored, at least, which meant he had taste. She liked mortals with taste. If he wasn't already a vampire, she might have brought him across for that reason alone.

As if he knew he was being inspected, he waited a moment, then turned toward her. The mane of brown hair, just below shoulder length, and the drop dead smile were locked into her memory immediately. Janette almost purred as he crossed the room and lifted her hand to his lips. "If I may be so forward, I'm Gregory Mercer."

The accent was British, pulling her own favored French accent into greater prominence. "You *are* forward, Mr. Mercer. I am Janette, the owner of the Raven. You wished to see me on some matter of business?"

"Business, yes." The smile dimmed, but barely. "But I like to know my business partners. The night is young and I'm a visitor to your city. Would you have the time, tonight, to show me some of the sights?"

Her internal clock told her that he was right— the night *was* young. The scent of the fire and burned flesh still clung to her nostrils. Withdrawing her hands from his, so that he wouldn't feel her slight shiver, she turned away. She needed to get out, get away from this place for a while. And who better to spend her time with than this handsome vampire, if Nicola would be too busy playing *gendarme*?

"I think, Mr. Mercer ... Gregory," she amended, "that I would like nothing better this evening. If you'll wait here, I'll make arrangements."

"Of course."

His elegant bow at their parting gave her something to chew on— just how old could he be? Well-mannered but brash, well-schooled but with a natural charm no schooling could impart ... Janette passed into the bar, eyes searching for Alma. Someone else could lock up for the night. It would do well for these fledglings to learn some responsibility. Nick was right— she pampered them.

Her hand reached out, plucking Alma from the dance floor as a child removed fruit from a tree. "I'm going out," she explained to the startled young vampiress. "I'll trust you and the others to lock up."

"But you'll be back before sunrise," said Alma.

Janette bristled when the tone implied a statement rather than a question.

"After all," continued Alma, "You're not as young—"

The girl had no idea of the danger in which she was placing herself. Janette placed her hand around Alma's shoulder, her nails digging into the skin and drawing blood. "In future, you will remember to keep such thoughts to yourself," she said, in a carefully neutral tone. "And *you* will lock up tonight."

Alma turned wide eyes to her. "Of course, Janette. Have a, uh, good time."

Arching an eyebrow, she glanced back at the office where Gregory was waiting and knew the girl followed her gaze. "There was an American actress who had a phrase— I believe it was along the lines of 'goodness has nothing to do with it.'"

With that, and a sharp smile, she crossed the dance floor on her way back to the office, knowing that every vampire eye in the club was watching her.

Part 2: In which Natalie is given a present

Nick nodded at Grace as he passed through the outer office. "Natalie in?"

"When is she ever out?" Grace crossed her arms, as if daring him to answer, then she glanced at the brightly patterned hat box he was carrying. "Then again, if you start bringing presents for Natalie—"

"Business, Grace," he answered, sweeping past her and to the door to the examining lab.

"Yeah. Sure." But she smiled and waved her hand at him. "Go on. She needs the break."

Natalie was dressed in scrubs when he entered; her mask was on, the microphone was humming, and every light in the place seemed to be burning. Of course, the patient she was working on didn't appreciate any of it.

She looked up, caught sight of him, muttered something into the microphone and switched it off, her eyes never leaving the hat box. "Is that for me?" she asked, pulling off her latex gloves.

"Yup." Nick held the box out to her, then perched himself on the counter, trying to hide his smile.

Matching the smile, Natalie distractedly pulled a cloth over the corpse on which she'd been working, then placed the hat box on an empty stainless steel gurney. She glanced at him again, looked down at the box suspiciously, then lifted off the cover.

Nick looked away as she opened the box, fixing his eyes on a chart against the wall. "Ick," was her first response. "Just what every girl needs?" Reaching over to a dispenser, she pulled on another set of latex gloves. "What am I looking at?"

"Vampire remains, with some added foam from a fire extinguisher."

"Anyone you knew?" She tipped the box this way and that, like a miner sifting for ore.

"No. He wandered into the Raven. Janette didn't know him either," he clarified, when she looked up at him quickly. "I hustled him in through the back alley when it looked like he was checking out the human clientele. He was starving."

She wrinkled her nose, her attention back on the box. "So, you fed him."

"Well, Janette did. He drank about two cups of blood mixed with alcohol. Then he started burning."

"Burning?" Picking up a probe, she began to sift through the ashes again. "I'd call that a significant allergic reaction. What set him on fire?"

Nick shrugged, wincing when she glared at him. "It was similar to a sunlight reaction. He went up like a magnesium flare. There was nothing left in a matter of minutes."

"So I see. Was he coherent before he started... burning?"

He watched her pick out some ivory buttons from the ashes. "He was starving—none of us are coherent at that point." He winced, remembering the mummified skin pinched tightly over the skull. "All he said was 'blood burns in the light.'"

"Well, we know *that*."

Nick hopped off the table and stood by her side. "I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it. So did Janette. It... shook her up."

Natalie looked up at him. Peeling off a latex glove, she reached up and, after he jerked away, touched his eyebrow. "Looks like you got a little singed." She turned, pulling off the other glove, and headed for the sink to wash her hands. "And a little spooked, yourself. So, this isn't standard vampire operating procedure, huh?"

"I'm stumped."

"You're the expert." Wiping her hands on a paper towel, she picked up the lid and placed it on the box, sighing. "I'll see if I can get something a little more dignified for your friend. Let me guess, it's Janette's, right?"

"Not my choice for a final resting place."

"Or anyone's. I'll look into it, later." Pushing the table to one side of the room, she shook her head. "You've got lousy timing. Have you called Stonetree?"

"It's my night off."

"It may be your night on again. Take a look at what the narcotics cats dragged in."

She led him over to the body on which she'd been working when he'd entered. "Just started on this one. I've got three more waiting, but they all look the same."

He half-closed his eyes, expecting to see the bloody remnants of a drug gang street battle. The last thing he needed was something like that to whet his appetite. Having a puzzle to solve often helped to push the beast into submission, but fresh blood often tempted it out of hiding.

What he saw was a male Caucasian, between the mid-teens and early twenties. Needle marks dotted the insides of both arms.

"Heavy user," he noted, remembering what she'd said about the bodies coming from narcotics.

"We're in the last stages of rigor, I'd say time of death has been over twenty-four hours, at least." She pointed to the barest discoloration along the base of the spine and along the back of the legs. "Lividity means they were sitting down when they died, then pretty much drained where they were."

Nick had been concentrating on the hatbox on the other gurney. That and trying to identify the sweet odor that accented the smell of rotting human flesh. That one word brought his full attention back to Natalie. "Drained?"

"That's why there's so little pronounced lividity. It's barely off-white. The blood's gone."

He immediately reached for the neck to check for marks, but Natalie shook her head. "No, not one of yours. Artificial pump, attached near the heart. Here." Moving the sheet, she showed him the raw wound left by the instrument. "Cause of death was an overdose."

"Of what?"

She covered the body again. "I don't know." Leaning back against the counter, she folded her arms and looked up at him. "Nobody does. This is our first set—"

"Set?"

"But we've already gotten word from Chicago and New York that they've had group overdoses like this, too. The bulletin came through a few days ago. The narcotics boys thought they'd gotten enough forewarning to get the word out on the street."

"Apparently not," said Nick, his gaze returning to the body. "Addictive?"

"It doesn't need to be. The speculation is that it produces a two to four hour high, then leads to simultaneous organ shut-down." She shrugged. "Kind of ruins the repeat trade, doesn't it?"

"Could death be caused by a residue reaction from other drugs in the system?"

"Might be," she admitted. "But one of those kids isn't a user—no marks. Most she's ever sniffed might be aerosol fumes. And that still begs the question."

"Why take the blood?" He walked back to the hatbox, resting his hands on the cover. "The other cases had blood drained?"

"Yes." Natalie held her breath for a second— it usually signified that she was branching out into what she considered uncertain territory. "Do you think one of your kind is involved?"

"Just because of the blood? No. It's... wrong."

"Fact or instinct?"

"Instinct," he answered, then amended quickly, "and some experience with the species. Vampires don't usually take blood after death. You couldn't survive on it. There's the taste of death in it. Maybe, if you were hard up, a scavenger ..." He shuddered, remembering the one time he had been forced to feed solely from corpses. "No, we don't do it by choice."

Natalie was watching him. "I don't suppose there'd be any residual effect of the drug in the blood. After all—"

"We're dead?"

"It's not like anyone's done any scientific studies on the effects of hard drug residue on vampires," she countered.

He moved his hand as if to touch her arm, then drew it back quickly. "I'm sorry, Nat. I'm still distracted from this—" his gaze went to the hat box. "I didn't mean to imply that you don't know what you're doing."

"Apology accepted. But you do know what this means?"

"We've got a homicide." Nick ran a hand through his hair. "And I've gotta call Stonetree. Thanks, Nat."

"Don't forget," she called, as he ran for the door, "first priority is a sample of this stuff."

"Your wish is my command." He bowed toward her as he went through the door backward, just as Grace was passing by.

She clicked her tongue at him as he headed for the phone. "Just business, huh?"

"Just business," he replied, with a forced smile, wondering how the jurisdiction war was progressing between Schanke and the crew from narcotics. A case of spontaneous combustion paled beside inter-departmental rivalry.

Part 3: In which Janette sees the light

Gregory held the door for her, bowing as she walked past him and into his apartment. "Enter freely," he said, with a smile.

"Those movies have much to answer for," Janette answered, sweeping into the room. She nodded approval at his choice of decor— simple black and white, with an emphasis on the white.

The music began at the moment he opened the door— a soft and wistful song sung by a crooner. He lifted the lace wrap from her shoulders, his hand pausing for a moment on the soft curve of her neck and she shivered. She turned toward him, but he had already moved away. "Antique?" he asked, carefully draping the wrap over the back of a hardwood chair.

She shrugged non-committally. "I suppose."

He was clever, this vampire, and quick to gauge her lack of interest in the subject. Instead, he turned toward the bar. "Another drink?"

The tiny chronometer in her heart that ticked off the hours of blessed darkness and dangerous daylight gently reminded her that it was time for all good little vampiresses to find their way to quiet, dark places, to rest out the scorching hours ahead. She frowned, prepared to shake her head wistfully, but three things stopped her: the thought of further proving to Alma that she wasn't as 'ancient' as her wrap, the promise shown by Gregory Mercer's attentiveness to her every whim all evening, and the drink she'd had before they'd left his apartment earlier... a sweet and heady brew that she couldn't identify.

Letting the frown linger, she said, "I *shouldn't*."

"But?" Gregory stood by the bar, dressed in an immaculate tuxedo. He'd told her that if he were to do her justice, he'd have to appear the proper escort for such a lady of quality. How could she refuse him?

And how could she refuse that ruby liquid in the crystal carafe sitting on the glass top of the bar? She walked toward the bar, as fascinated by the blood in the pitcher as she was by the handsome vampire. "It's too splendid an opportunity to let pass. "You must tell me what it is."

"Ah, could that be occupational curiosity?" he asked, pouring the blood into a crystal goblet, which he handed to her.

"Perhaps." She took a sip, let the iron taste dissolve on her tongue and closed her eyes, savoring the delicate flavor. When she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her.

Good. She liked to be the center of attention. Especially male attention. Walking away from him, she held the glass upward, inspecting it in the light of one of the room's many lamps. "And you're not about to tell me the secret, are you?"

"You tell me." Elbows resting on the top of the bar, he leaned forward, cupping his chin in his hands. "If you're right, I'll give you a bottle to take with you."

That was an offer she couldn't refuse. Again, Janette took a sip. "Citrus," she announced, after a thoughtful pause. "It tastes like ... sunlight. Or how sunlight *should* taste."

"Close," he admitted. "Very, very close. Enough to qualify for a consolation prize."

"Oh." Janette pouted and sipped at the glass again. If she could wean the secret of this mixture from this handsome vampire, The Raven would soon be the talk of vampires everywhere.

Gregory smiled and left the bar, walking toward her. "You look disappointed."

The pout remained. She'd found it most effective in getting what she wanted from recalcitrant males ... with the exception of LaCroix and Nicola. "Perhaps I am. You take me to a very chic nightclub, you treat me like a queen, and then you make sport of me."

"Never, Janette," he said quietly. "Sport is the last thing I'd make of you." Slipping one arm around her waist, he placed his other hand around hers, over the stem of the glass, then began to sway to the music. They alternated sipping from the glass.

"Do you remember what it's like— the sunlight?" he asked, leaning forward to nuzzle her neck.

Janette shivered involuntarily in his arms, as the memory of the burning vampire returned— the heat of the flames and the smell of singed flesh— but Gregory tightened his grip and she snuggled against his shoulder. "Why torture ourselves?" she whispered. "It's something we may never have again. Nicola is a fool, to believe that he may walk in the sunlight again, without burning. It's madness." Drawing back from him, she retained the possession of the crystal glass and drained the remaining drops, savoring the taste. "But this! This is true sunlight. If this is your creation, Gregory, then you are an *artist*."

She saw his eyes light at the compliment and something in her breast fluttered, however weakly. The blood made her feel giddy, possessing more impact than her alcohol-laced private stock ever did. He took the glass from her hand, but she held onto it for a moment, her fingers touching his, then leaving the stem to travel up his arms, to his shoulders. Her lips touched his, and they met no resistance.

Distantly, she registered the crash of the glass as it fell to the parquet floor of his apartment. His arms moved around her and he returned her kiss with equal passion. A flash of memory, of Alma's incredulous expression when she'd left on Gregory's arm, added fuel to her fire.

But ... something was wrong. Different. Her fangs hadn't fallen into place and neither had his. Her senses weren't colored by the bloodlust that had always accompanied such passion.

Janette pulled back from him. His lips followed hers, but then Gregory paused. Their eyes met, their gazes locked.

He took a deep breath and expelled it, slowly. "I don't suppose I explained about that consolation prize, did I?"

He left her, stalking purposefully toward the heavy, black draperies that covered the glass doors leading to the apartment balcony. Turning, he placed one hand high upon the track along which the draperies ran, pale fingers twisted among the black cloth.

His hair was disheveled, his eyes very brown, and wide, and mad. She opened her mouth in horror and she turned, looking for some place to hide, knowing what he planned.

Behind her came the sound of tearing cloth and broken metal and wood. Then the warmth of the early morning sun touched her.

It was much later than she'd thought and there was nowhere to hide.

Janette began to scream.

Part 4: In which Nick gets a call and Janette meets the morning

The light entering the slitted blinds of his apartment was already starting to creep across the floor. Nick forced himself to walk toward the television, where the remote for the blinds had been left. With measured steps he crossed the room on a gray tightrope, balancing between the patches of light and dark that dotted his floor. Only after picking up the remote and shutting the blinds completely did he relax, easing down into the black leather couch.

His head resting against the back of the couch, he massaged his closed eyelids with his fingertips. Sunlight, and what it could do to him, scared the hell out of him, but he was usually able to keep that fear within the realm of reason. After what he'd seen at The Raven... the vampire's words kept echoing in his brain— *Blood burns in the light.*

The smell of the burning body and the sudden flare of fire was still with him. He knew it would be preying on Janette s mind, no matter how hard she tried to distract herself, whether it be with wine-laced blood, thundering music, or a brief flirtation with one of the party-boys at the club. He'd meant to call her, but he'd gotten busy. By the time he'd reached the abandoned building where narcotics had tracked down one of their missing stoolies— discovering four bodies, instead— most of the ground had been covered. Schanke had gone home until jurisdiction could be straightened out. Even some discreet prowling on his part turned up nothing new— too many warm bodies had come and gone in the intervening hours for him to pick up much of anything.

Nick was tired, frustrated... and hungry. He shifted his position on the couch, so that he could easily glance across at the refrigerator. Natalie couldn't fault him, not with the pressure he'd been under lately. If he was ever going to cross over again, into the light, he'd need his strength. And strength, right now, was provided by the cow blood chilling in his refrigerator.

The decision equaled action— Nick half-rose and vaulted over the back of the couch, heading for his stash of blood. The door was opened, he picked up a bottle, popped the cork with his teeth, and was gulping down the thick red liquid. Seconds passed before he regained enough control to actually sip it, instead of chugging it.

Staring at the bottle in his hand, he made a mental note to ask Natalie if his problem could be compared to binging. Rather than constantly denying himself what he needed and what he couldn't get from protein drinks and rare hamburgers, maybe he'd do better to put himself on a strict, measured regimen; drinking steadily but cutting back, instead of going cold turkey.

He opened the refrigerator door and put the bottle back inside. It might work, but it wouldn't save him from Natalie's wrath. Oh, she might not say anything past the first barbed comment or two, but there was always that disappointment in her eyes. He'd marveled that he desperately wanted to prove to her that he had the inner strength she seemed to see within him.

So, he was frustrated by an incinerated vampire, four overdoses with missing blood, and a disappointed Natalie. Was there anyone else he could disappoint?

Then again ... he could still check on Janette.

He was on his way to the telephone when his senses exploded.

NICOLA!

For an instant, there was bright white light everywhere and the sound of Janette's scream filled his ears. He stumbled, knocking into a table and the back of the couch as the world righted itself. Still tasting the blood on his lips, he wondered how he would have weathered that call without recent fortification.

Then it struck him.

Janette. Sunlight. Fear.

That was the message. The *only* message. And, try as he might, he had no real sense of Janette.

Scrambling to his feet, Nick raced to the phone, punching the auto dial. The phone at The Raven rang three times, then five, then ten— he stopped counting at fifteen.

Finally, the ringing stopped as the phone was lifted from the cradle. "Y'ello?" asked a sleepy, female voice.

Not Janette. "Alma? This is Detective Knight. Is Janette there? I have to speak with her."

"Janette? Who—? Oh," there was a yawn, "Janette? She's ... um ... out for the day."

"Out?" Nick looked up at the darkened windows, well knowing that the sun was shining. Janette never strayed from The Raven past dawn, except for the occasional emergency. "What happened?"

"Oh, you know Janette. She was bored, I guess. She's just... out." Her voice was clearer, Alma seemed to be awake. "You know, *Detective* Knight, she's not as old as she looks. A girl her age needs to get out and have some fun now and again."

Nick threw back his head and counted beneath his breath, forcing back the frustrated roar that would be far more effective in person. Alma was trying to play games again. "Alma, listen— this is very important— can you tell me *where* she is?"

"I don't know if—"

"Alma, I'm *not* Janette. I don't *like* games. And if you don't tell me what you know, I'll come over to The Raven right now and throw you into the sunlight."

Alma wasn't that bright, but she was still a young vampire. If anything, her fear of fire and sunlight was even greater than Janette's. "His name's Gregory Mercer," she said, the words coming quick and high-pitched. "He had a business card, but Janette took it. They left together— he said he wanted to talk business with her. He's one of us. And she didn't know who he was— they've never met."

"Very good, Alma," he said softly, but leaving the steel in his voice. "Now go have a nice nap. And when you see Janette, have her call me."

Hanging up the phone, he sighed, realizing that LaCroix had passed on his talent for intimidation, if nothing else. Then again, if LaCroix had wanted information from Alma, she would never have survived the encounter. At least he'd gotten a name.

Gregory Mercer.

It didn't ring any bells. Then again, their kind often changed names as mortals shed clothing— so much easier to detach oneself from an old life and enter into a new one, if you could call what they did 'living.'

Picking up the phone, Nick wandered to the couch and started dialing. He'd see what his friends at the department knew about a 'Gregory Mercer.' There was no point in trying to sleep; the sound of Janette's voice was still ringing in his ears.

And whenever he closed his eyes... he saw the light.

* * *

There were hands pinning her, holding her against the wall, covering her mouth. Still screaming, her eyes closed, Janette struck out blindly, twisting and kicking.

"Janette? Janette, listen to me! It can't hurt you! It can't hurt you any more! Can you hear me? Janette!"

The voice was lying. It was the light and it would burn, burn like the vampire at The Raven, and burn in the light, the blood burns in the light—

She *wasn't* burning.

Janette's eyes shot open. Gregory Mercer was standing before her, one hand holding her against the wall, the other covering her mouth. That hand dropped the instant she looked at him and the pressure on the other one eased. "Janette— I didn't know you would— I didn't mean— none of the others ever!—"

There was no breath left in her to produce sound. Janette breathed deeply, still staring at him. "How *dare* you!" she hissed, almost spitting in his face. "I am not amused by this! If you think it's funny to fool me into thinking I'm in the sunlight—"

"But you *are*," he answered, his voice very soft. "And you're more beautiful than ever." Then he stepped aside, so that she could look past him.

There was light. It was white, golden sunlight, shining full upon her from the east. The sun was beginning its upward journey and the sky around it was blue, well beyond banishing the pinks, reds, and violets of dawn.

Entranced, Janette walked to the balcony door, pressing her cheek against the glass. It was warm, without burning. She closed her eyes, feeling the light heat on her pale skin, wanting to stretch like a cat in the glow. But then her eyes flew open again— she had to *see*!

Her fingers fumbled with the catch of the door and she was on the concrete balcony. Twelve stories up, her view was barely impeded. The sun shone down on the city below her. A light, warm breeze touched her and she lifted her arms, feeling the urge to fly—

Then Gregory's hand clamped on her shoulder and she turned to face him. "You can't fly," he said. "We're like them, like mortals. Most of what we need to survive in the night goes dormant during the day."

The words didn't make sense to her at first, her eyes were still dazzled by the brilliance of the sky. But as she stared at him, the enormity of it hit her.

"How?" she asked, then realized that her lips had made no sound.

But he understood. Sliding her hand into his own, he smiled and led her inside the apartment, partially closing the glass door behind her. Carefully, Gregory set her onto one of his white couches, then sat beside her, still holding her hand. "You said I was an artist. Well, I'm a chemist. Or, I was, before I came across."

"An 'alchemist'?" she asked, still sun-dazed.

He laughed lightly. "In a way. I was what could properly be termed a biochemist... although we didn't call it that back then. The how— it's far too complicated." He placed his finger on her lips as she protested. "And my own trade secret. But I've been walking in the sunlight for over a year, now."

"A ... year." Janette stared at him, stunned, then looked over his shoulder, to the light streaming through the window. "Am I—? Are we—?"

"We're still vampires," he told her. "It *does* wear off. Think of it as a sort of heavy-duty sun screen. All that you need to know is that you have a day in the sun. It's my gift to you."

"Your gift. To me." She paused, wary. "And what will this gift cost me?"

"Nothing. As I said, it's a gift." Gregory's eyes were wide and earnest. She felt herself trusting him, a feeling that she hadn't felt in some time.

Then there was a sound, a strange sound that stirred something in her memory. Rising and walking past him, she went out to the balcony again.

Gregory followed. "What—?"

"That... sound."

"Sound?" He looked around, then pointed up, at the bottom of the balcony over them. Several small birds were building nests, chirping and singing to one another. "The birds? It's spring."

"Birdsong." Eyes wide, Janette stared up at them. The sound they made was so different than what she was used to hearing. Most songbirds didn't sing at night. And the memories they stirred in her, of her childhood—

"We are... mortal. For the day?" she asked, resting her head against Gregory's shoulder.

"For the day." He touched the strap of her sheathe dress. "I think I know the first stop for you. Those are hardly day clothes. A bit of shopping is in order."

"Shopping?" She laughed and touched his cheek. "You can't be serious! I want to go to the park. I want to see the streets. I want to see—" she paused, "is the water safe?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so. Why? Are you planning to take a cruise?"

"I want to watch the boats on the water."

"And you'll look damned strange standing there in a black evening dress, however becoming it may be."

Janette chuckled under her breath. She liked this vampire, with his courteous ways and his ability to turn every criticism into a compliment. Turning her head, she began to study him in the light— the shadows on his face, how his dark night eyes were golden brown, mirroring golden strands in his dark hair. "All right," she relented, "We'll go shopping. But there are other things I'd like to do in the daylight."

Pulling him close, she whispered in his ear. She took delight in that he was mortal enough in the sunlight to blush.

"What?" he croaked, as she toyed with the collar of his shirt. "On the balcony? Janette, it's broad daylight.".

"Exactly!" And with that, Janette reached up and kissed him full on the lips.

Part 5: In which London burns and Nick wakes a sleeping beauty

The wooden shutters on the window were drawn closed, heavy black cloth draped across them. Nicholas toyed with the stiff white collar that rested over the neck of his blue doublet, then his hand moved toward the cloth at the window.

The music ceased suddenly, the bow hissing across the strings. "You don't want to do that."

His fingers paused, barely touching the cloth. He wanted to disobey, to tear the cloth from the window, but fear stopped him— fear of the light... and of LaCroix. Hissing, he whirled, the curls that hung at his shoulders brushing against his neck, his high-heeled boots thumping as he paced the floor.

The room was dark and cramped, the beams of the ceiling less than an inch above his head as he walked the length of the room. The walls seemed to be closing in upon him, as the noise from the crowds outside grew louder, the sound of crashing timber and hissing flame adding to the tumult.

The bow sighed against the instrument again and LaCroix shook his head lightly as he went back to his music. Leaning against the edge of the table, he waited in the deepest shadows. "You should pay more attention to fashion. Those boots were out of style long before the Lord Protector met his end."

"The Lord Protector met his end in his own bed. And my boots are still perfectly serviceable, thank you."

Shrugging, LaCroix purposefully mis-drew the bow, making the strings screech, before beginning another highland jig.

Unable to take any more, Nicholas stalked toward him. "Stop that— noise! *Stop* it!"

LaCroix pointed at him with the bow, using it as one would use a fencing foil. His eyes glittered and the hints of a smile played around the corners of his mouth. "Or—?"

Ducking his head, Nicholas looked away, stalking nervously to the window again. He could smell the smoke and the cries of the refugees were growing louder, even through the heavy shutters of their secluded house. "London is burning," he growled. "It's been two days and London is *still* burning! Don't just sit there playing that damned instrument!"

"There *is* precedent," said LaCroix quietly. Then, sighing, he set aside the bow, tenderly laying the violin on the wooden table. "There are times when I wonder if I'll ever be able to properly civilize you, Nicholas. But as you so object to my playing—"

Slipping a quilted satchel over the wooden instrument, LaCroix carefully wrapped the bow in lamb's wool. "I've been told of a young violinist in the south of the continent. He's supposedly the master of his craft, the best of the age. You'd find the country interesting, Nicholas. The drink is stronger stuff than these peasants would ever dare to touch and the babes are weaned on it. And the women—"

LaCroix rubbed the soft woolen bundle against his cheek, before packing it with the violin. "They're as strong and as heady as their drink. There's a dusky, earthy, flavor to them."

"Good." Nicholas walked over to him. "Let's find Janette and go. Let's go, *tonight*, when the sun sets."

"That won't be for another hour or so." LaCroix paused, his eyes fixing on the covered windows. Almost mechanically, he withdrew a pair of black leather gloves from his satchel and tugged them over his hands. "But ... I agree. The time's come to leave this place. I can't abide the stench of London for much longer. You've packed, as I told you?"

Nicholas found himself held in place by those eyes. He nodded dumbly, gesturing toward his own small satchel, which rested on the floor by the barred door. LaCroix nodded in response and smiled, clapping him on the shoulder. "Good."

"And Janette?"

The eyes fastened on him again— serpent's eyes, lidless and unblinking. "So, you've found your voice."

"We *must* find her!"

"*Must* we?" After a moment, LaCroix shrugged and walked to the window again. "We shall find another Janette, Nicholas. There are thousands of beautiful young women awaiting our kisses. We have only to choose the one to suit our needs. The others will feed our hunger."

"But—"

"It's time to go."

Nicholas followed close on his heels as LaCroix walked back to the windows. "But you said we've two hours until sunset—"

The sound outside was reaching a crescendo. The heat was palpable now— a blistering, roaring, angry spirit venting its wrath on the wooden metropolis.

"We leave, *now*," stated LaCroix, tossing aside his feathered hat for the dark monk's cowl he pulled over his head. "London is burning, dear Nicholas. Or haven't you heard?"

The black gloved hand reached for the cloth over the window shutters. Nicholas moved forward, his own hand trying to catch the black covering before it was moved, before the daylight could spill into the room and burn them, as surely as the fire—

* * *

He was on his feet, wide-eyed, still caught in the terror of that moment. Wiping the back of his hand against his forehead, Nick collapsed onto the couch and breathed deeply. He wanted a drink, wanted to wipe the taste of fear from his mouth with cool, clean blood. It'd been some time since he'd thought about the fire, about losing Janette.

Janette.

Racing to the phone, he found the message light blinking. Nick picked up the receiver, then stopped before he dialed. He struck the replay button, hoping against hope that one of his many calls had borne fruit.

"Hey Nick, what, is everybody in the department on your private payroll?"

He winced at the sound of Schanke's voice, finger pausing over the fast-forward button. "Come *on*, Schank!"

"Got a couple of messages for you. Joe says 'no go' on that Mercer guy— is he a suspect I don't know about? You gotta talk to me, man. We're partners. Me, I've got about fifty pounds of paperwork on the desk. Looks like we got a guy passing some heavy-duty bad stuff. Even Scotland Yard wants in on this one. And guess what? Narcotics fumbled— we've got the ball! Stonetree wants you here A.S.A.P. This paperwork's driving me snow-blind."

The message ended and the tape rewound. Nick stared at it, heart sinking. Nothing. All of his phone calls, all of the favors he'd called in, and no one had come up with anything.

Lifting the receiver, he punched the auto-dial and listened to the clicks that would connect him to The Raven. The sun had just set and the young vampires would be tumbling out of the wine cellar and other nooks and crannies in which they'd chosen to spend their daylight hours.

Five rings before the phone was picked up— it was Alma again. "Raven."

"Alma, is Janette back yet?"

There was a pause. "Yeah, *Detective* Knight. She wandered in a few minutes ago. Looks like she had a busy day. A *very* busy day."

"Can you put her on?"

"Well," another pause, "actually, she's sleeping."

Nick found himself staring at the phone, wondering if he'd heard right. "She's—?"

"Out cold," confirmed Alma, in a satisfied tone. "Like I said, a *very* busy day. But if you want me to wake her for you—"

"No! No. I'll stop by on my way to work."

"Oh, yeah. You do that, don't you. Work? What's it like?"

"Try it some time. You might like it." He slammed down the receiver and took a deep breath. He had no patience with fledglings anymore. He wondered how Janette could stand their insufferable arrogance.

Then again, there were a lot of things he was wondering about Janette. He intended to get answers. But first—

Walking back to the couch, he picked up the remote control and pushed the button. The shades of the windows hummed open, letting in the last deep blush of twilight as he headed for a shower and a shave.

* * *

There was a ticklish sensation along her neck. Purring, Janette snuggled deeper into the fur coat in which she'd chosen to wrap herself, enjoying the warmth. But the sensation was repeated.

Annoyed, she opened one eye and saw Nicola looking down upon her, his expression quizzical. He was standing behind the couch, the sleeve of the coat in his hand. "Ummm, Nicola, she murmured, shifting on the soft cushions of the couch. "What a lovely sight to find when I awake."

Dropping the sleeve of the fur, he walked to her office desk, and leaned against the side. "Alma told me you were sleeping. I wasn't certain I should believe her."

"It's always best to question Alma's version of reality," said Janette sagely. Coyly, she pulled back the fur, exposing a leg covered with silk hose and the hem of a very chic and expensive beige dress. "What do you think? I hear it's all the rage in New York."

She frowned when his reaction consisted of nothing more than a slight movement of his eyebrow. "I thought your color was black?"

"Pooh. You're no fun." Stretching languidly, she touched the tips of her fingers and her toes to either end of the couch, then rose to a sitting position. "And if you're not going to play, you can't stay. I'm hoping for a diverting evening."

"What? With as big a diversion as last night?"

Pouting, she picked up the coat and dragged it over her shoulder as she crossed the room, draping it over a chair. "Nicola, that's not nice. You know that horrible vampire upset me so. Why did he have to come here? Why couldn't he have burst into flames somewhere else? Say—" turning toward him, she placed her finger to her lips and smiled, "why couldn't he have visited your favorite coroner? *She* would have enjoyed the spectacle far more than I."

"Janette, leave Natalie out of this," Nicola answered. He hadn't moved, but his eyes had gone cold.

"But she's *in* this, isn't she, Nicola? Because you take all of your little problems and investigations to her." Janette examined the coat, picking up a sleeve, shifting a seam, as it lay over the back of the chair. "This is beginning to bore me. The color, the cut ... it's too common."

Lifting the full weight of it with one hand, she picked it up and tossed it at him. "Give it to your mortal girlfriend. I doubt she has a fur muff, never mind a coat. And that mousy brown color would *so* suit her."

Before he could say anything, she slipped into the next room and behind her screen. She wasn't really certain why she was taunting Nicola this way. It served him right, though, waking her like that. And now that she'd been awakened, she might as well dress and get ready for Gregory's arrival.

Janette licked her lips as she ran her finger along the rows of dresses on her rack. Without turning, she called, "Nicola, do be a dear and buzz Alma." She chose one and held it up, turning to check out the look in the mirror, but Nicola stood before her. A breath caught in her throat, but she hid her look of surprise. "You *do* creep like a cat," she complimented. "Although it took you too many centuries to learn how."

"Where were you today?"

She twisted herself this way and that with the dress, as if he'd moved out of the way and she was checking her reflection. Frowning, she returned it on the rack and chose another. "Nicola, is that ... are you jealous, my sweet? How charming!" Pushing past him, she brushed her fingers along his cheek, cupping his chin for a moment. "But then, it isn't your business where I spend my days."

Leaving him, she posed before the mirror and nodded, approving the look of the dress. Faint twinges of hunger brought a frown to her lips, but she found the thought of her normal diet distasteful. Who could drink that horribly distilled wine, after dining on sunshine?

It was only then that she realized Nicola was speaking. "Hmmm?" she asked, dreamily, still staring at her reflection in the mirror.

He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders, staring into her mirror eyes. "It *is* my business where you spend your days. I— I just don't want anything to happen to you, Janette. I don't want you to be hurt."

There was a sadness, a softness in his face that she had not seen for some time. Dropping the dress to the floor, she turned to place her arms around his neck, but the room tilted on her. With a cry, she began to fall, but Nick's strong arms caught her, lowering her to the carpeted floor of the boudoir.

"Janette?" Nicola touched the back of his hand to the side of her face. "You're warm."

His fingers were cool against her cheek and she wrapped her hand in his, closing her eyes. "I'm... hungry," she admitted, licking her lips again. "I shouldn't be, but—"

"Am I intruding?" asked a voice from the doorway.

Janette's eyes shot open and she twisted free of Nicola's arms, crying, "Gregory!" She made no pretense at grace as she scrambled to her feet over the discarded dress and ran to him, embracing him tightly. Her sudden weakness disappeared as his lips touched hers. She could smell the scent of sunlit blood on his breath.

He drew back from her for a moment, holding her at arm's length. "That's quite a welcome from such a lovely lady."

"No more than a handsome man deserves," she returned. Noticing that he had one hand behind his back, she tried to peek around him, but he moved, thwarting her. Giving up, she planted herself in front of him. "What did you bring me?"

"How do you know I brought you anything?" he teased.

"Because I'll pout if you disappoint me."

"I'll try to remember that." He pulled a long-necked, crystal bottle from behind his back, presenting it to her with the base of it resting in his palm, like a wine steward. "Does it meet with Madame's approval?"

"Oh, yes!" said Janette, her eyes filled with the ruby red color that shown through the twinkling crystal. "I have glasses—"

It was only when she turned that she remembered that Nicola was there. He stood beside her changing screen, arms crossed, and eyebrow raised. Gregory could not have failed to have seen him. But then, Gregory was a gentleman, and gentlemen waited for a proper introduction.

Putting on her most gracious smile, Janette caught Gregory's arm and pulled him to her side, careful not to upset that beautiful bottle of blood. "Gregory, may I present an old... friend, Nicola— Nick Knight. Nicola, this is Gregory Mercer. He is... new to our part of the world."

Not being foolish, she slipped the bottle from Gregory's grasp as he and Nicola approached one another. Men could be so foolish at times and she wasn't about to let stupid male ego keep her from vanquishing her hunger.

"Knight?" asked Gregory. "A relic of your youthful occupation or a chosen avocation?"

"Both."

Nicola's voice was filled with steel— she was just as glad she had her back to them. Opening a small cabinet, she withdrew two of her finest crystal glasses and set them on the small, leather pad that protected the wooden surface.

"Nicola is a police detective," she announced, while carefully maneuvering the cork-edged stopper from the bottle. "He... works for a living."

"Do you, now? I've kept my hand in myself— imports, exports. I'll cheerfully admit, I don't have the experience or years under my belt that either of you have. I'm still trying to build myself a nest egg to invest for my eternity."

Janette focused her attention on pouring the blood from the bottle, terrified that she might lose a drop. If neither of them had been present, she would've upended the whole thing into her mouth. She was almost faint with hunger just *looking* at it.

"Oh, Janette, allow me," said Gregory, hurrying over.

The crystal bottle was snatched from her hand, but almost instantly replaced by the stem of a filled glass. Recapping the bottle, he set it atop the cabinet, then picked up his own glass and raised it in a toast to her. "Beautiful Janette—"

She hungrily raised the glass to her lips, but stopped herself when he turned to Nicola. "Won't you join us— Nick?"

"He won't," she said sharply, darting a look in Nicola's direction. Her annoyance at being denied her treat leaked into her words as she added, "It's human. He only drinks *cow*."

Gregory winced. "That's a bitter pill. Not because you have to, I hope. You're not ill?"

"It's a dietary choice," said Nick, with forced pleasantness. "But— speaking of illness—"

Janette could wait no longer. She hurriedly clinked her glass with Gregory's and tipped the edge to her lips. Before she knew it, she'd gulped down the full glass of blood.

For a brief movement she was embarrassed at her social *faux pas*, but Gregory merely smiled and matched her, downing most of his own glass, before setting it on top of the cabinet. She touched her finger to the side of his mouth, gently wiping away a speck of blood, and found him in her mind's eye, bathed in sunlight, as they'd walked across the cool, green grass. How she burned to tell Nicola about the sunlight!

But Gregory had asked her not to— at least, not yet. There would be time, he'd promised. And, she realized, that's why she'd been so cross with Nicola before! She desperately wanted to tell him about her day in the sunlight and *couldn't*.

"We should go," said Gregory, reaching for the crystal bottle.

Janette's gaze moved from his face to the bottle and she smiled, ready to follow him, and his precious elixir, anywhere. Tonight she'd have the secret, or so Gregory had promised. And once the secret of sunlight was hers...

There was a movement beside her and she turned quickly, facing Nicola. His hand brushed against her cheek again. "Janette, perhaps you shouldn't—"

"What, Nicola? Go out, into the night?" She tossed back her head, the shell earrings she had bought during the day clattering against one another. "I was spending my nights out when you were still dreaming mortal dreams."

Nicola stared at his fingers, then moved to touch her cheek again. "You don't feel warm any longer." When she jerked her head away from his touch, his hand clenched into a fist, which he dropped to his side. "Perhaps, it was only my imagination."

"Perhaps it was." Janette met his gaze evenly, then smiled and touched her finger to his lips. "Be happy for me, Nicola. I shall tell you all, later, when the time is right."

Gregory cleared his throat. "Janette?"

Slipping her arm through his carefully, so as not to disturb the bottle, she nodded at Gregory. "Were my packages delivered?"

"Every one!" he promised.

"Good. Then I shall change there." Tossing her head again, Janette put on her most charming smile. "Good night, Nicola. Don't wait up. And do ask Alma to lock up for me again. She's a most forgetful, silly girl."

So, for the second time in as many nights, Janette walked through the crowded dance floor of The Raven on Gregory's arm. She was pleased to note that, this time, her beige day dress received almost as much attention as the handsome vampire beside her.

Part 6: In which Schanke gets a clue

London *was* burning.

Nicholas held the heavy cloth over himself, racing out the door after LaCroix—but the bright sun of day had disappeared beneath the billowing gusts of black and yellow smoke. Ash fell like rain, accompanied by the thundering crashes of houses falling in upon themselves.

Starring in wonderment at the sight, Nicholas' hands fell to his side, the cloth forgotten. It was like a scene from one of the priest's sermons. Red and yellow flames leapt against the darkened sky to the south. Many of the landmark church steeples were burning or had disappeared. Even the screams and cries of the damned were supplied by refugees from the flames, crowding Cornehill on the way to the Leadenhall Marketplace or those surging east toward Cheapside for safety. One man's voice called out an offer of forty pounds for a cart, while a woman stood in the center of the melee and screamed hysterically, a small, wide-eyed child clinging desperately to her skirts.

There was a tug on his arm, which he tried to shrug off— LaCroix would not release his grip. He pointed to the left, toward Leadenhill and began to push his way into the crowd.

But Nicholas stayed where he was for a moment, still taking in the scene around him. He felt detached, senses still deadened by the day, his night powers and abilities absent until dusk. It was the south that interested him, not the east. The south, near Thames Street, where Janette had sought her amusements these past three months.

LaCroix screamed his name— he could hear it clearly above the tumult— but he ignored the call. Ducking his head, he held the black cloth over himself, to shield from the falling ash as well as any sunlight, and burrowed into the mass of humanity. LaCroix was as helpless as he in the daylight. He would pay for his insubordination later.... if he survived. But now he needed to find Janette, to know if she had burned, or was trapped, or had escaped the fires.

The crowds thronged the streets; most refugees, some roving gangs looking for loot or someone to blame for the fire, and a few brave souls forming water brigades and trying to douse the flames on this building or that. Nicholas pitied the latter— their task was insurmountable, but they continued throwing the thimblefuls of relief against the raging flame. Had his own mission not been as imperative, he might have stopped to help them. He admired the bravery of those men... and women.

Relentlessly, almost ruthlessly, he made his way south. Alleys and entire streets were blocked by fire or clogged with fallen debris. As he headed down Lombard Street for Grace Church, a street wider than most and which he was certain would be passable, a sudden rush of wind struck him and he, as well as the rest of the crowd, were driven to the northern side of the cobbled stone way. Fire came roaring northward despite a row a houses, passing through one after another, the tongues of flame screeching overhead through a blown-out window like the arm of some great demon, then dissipating when there was nothing left to burn.

His ears were already becoming inured to the sounds around him, but at the sight of the flames, his heart leapt in his throat and some tiny portion of his once-baptized soul began to pray, using words that he no longer understood or believed.

* * *

"Detective Knight?"

Nick started, then forced a smile as he rose to his feet. The squad room had been quiet. If Schanke had been there he'd have taken the package down to the lab himself. As it was, he'd drifted off into reverie.

The lab assistant was wearing a suit jacket. He fussed with the lapel. "I hate pick-ups. You got me out of my lab coat and sweats for this."

"Sorry."

Gesturing toward the cardboard box on the desk, the assistant asked, "This it?"

"Yeah. Can we get a rush on that?"

The young man opened the lid of the box and peered inside. Nick was pleased to see the crystal goblet hadn't broken. "Good— it isn't cut glass. Man, those are a bear to work with. Smooth— hell, we'll just use some magnetized filings. Latent or patent?"

Nick hesitated, hoping against hope that Gregory Mercer was as young a vampire as he claimed— there'd still be enough oil in the dead skin to get a good fingerprint off him. "Latent. I didn't catch any patent. Then again, that's not my job—?"

"Gotcha." The lab assistant gave him a thumb's up, then tucked the package under his arm— Nick very much expected to hear the crash of the glass inside. "But you owe me."

"Schanke will pay you," promised Nick, as his partner approached the desk.

The bewildered detective stared at Nick. "Schanke will pay what? What?" he pressed. Turning and following the lab assistant out of the squad room and getting no answer, he entered again, a finger pointing at Nick. "Schanke's saving up for his kid's education, so you can pay for whatever it is, Mr. Bachelor Pad."

"It's a clue. I just asked the lab boys to put a rush on it," promised Nick. He sat down in his chair and leaned back, gazing up at Schanke with what he hoped was an innocent expression. "That's business-related, tax-deductible, right?"

"A clue? As in 'the case on which we have been handed from Narcotics without a hope in hell of solving' kind of clue?" Schanke rubbed his hands together greedily. "Oh boy, oh boy, is this gonna look great on the file. It'll make up for them creaming us at the last department picnic. Which *you* didn't attend."

"I was on duty the night before." Nick tipped the chair back into position and opened one of the files of his desk. Schanke was getting better at turning the tables at him in mid-conversation. He'd have to be more careful in future.

But Schanke wasn't letting go. He sat on the edge of the desk. "Ten-eight! Two runs— that was all we needed. And our star hitter doesn't show." When Nick refused to answer, he leaned forward. "I thought you *liked* baseball?"

Giving up, Nick closed the file. "I *do*. I like *watching* baseball." He rose from his desk and walked over to the coat hook, anxious to retrieve his jacket and get away from Schanke.

"So come and *watch*. Support the team. We'll... we'll let you be bat boy."

"Now *that* I'd like to see."

Nick turned in time to see Natalie walk into the squad room. Out of her lab whites, she was dressed in a light tweed jacket and skirt and held a manila folder in her hand. She gave a slight wave as someone called, but her eyes were on Nick.

"Ah, the cavalry," he sighed, returning to his chair. "Natalie, would you ask him to lay off about the picnic?"

She frowned and looked at Schanke questioningly. "But that's two months away— not until June, at least."

"So, I figured I'd get an early start on him." He clapped Nick on the shoulder. "Come on— a little sun, a little fun, a little barbecue... what's wrong with that?"

Nick sighed again. "You're not going to help me, are you?" he asked Natalie.

Her smile was her answer. "Who knows? Maybe by then your condition will have improved enough to— they really *do* need your help."

Placing his hand in front of his mouth, as if hiding the comment from Schanke, Nick asked, "Are they really *that* bad?"

For a moment, Natalie paused, then bit her lip. "Um— I refuse to answer on the grounds that I have to work with you guys. *Both* of you guys."

"Well, you can talk, you've got the trophy," grumbled Schanke, crossing his arms.

Nick sat upright in his chair. "These are hidden depths, Nat. I want details. Was it a slaughter?"

She lowered her eyes modestly. "We took Narcotics, seven to three." Brushing her fingernails against the lapel of her jacket, she added, "Of course, we had the print lab and the rest of forensics on the team."

"And you hit a home run?"

Natalie stuck her tongue out and turned her back to him. Shrugging his shoulders, Nick looked to Schanke.

"No homers, but a beautiful pop fly to left field," he offered.

"Which you dropped."

Schanke straightened his tie with an aggrieved expression. "Hey, I'm trying to help you out, here."

"Which I appreciate. And I'm here to return the favor." She handed him the manila folder. "Grace ran through that syringe you came up with— it's the same drug that killed those kids."

"Syringe, what syringe?" asked Nick, reaching for the folder, but Schanke pulled it out of his reach.

"The syringe *I* found doing a second run-through of the crime scene," said Schanke archly. He flipped through the pages, glancing down at them as he spoke. "You see, Knight, I've helped out on Narcotics cases before. Users don't waste needles— especially a needle that might have a hit or half a hit left. So, I went back and checked the place out, thinking, 'If I were a kid who'd just shot up—'"

"'Where would I hide a needle,'" finished Nick. He shot Natalie an appreciative glance. "And where *would* you have hidden the needle?"

"Nat said something about death being just about instantaneous," noted Schanke. "And we found all four kids sitting up— but the theory is someone moved them just after they died, right? So I figured out the length of the kids' arm reaches, made a circle and— right there in a crack in the floorboards!"

"You are amazing," said Nick, allowing his admiration to be overshadowed by a sarcastic tone.

"That's what I keep telling you." Schanke handed the folder back to Natalie. "So what does *this* mean?"

"It means that I have a sample, a very *small* sample of the drug to work from. So far I've gotten it down to base elements, but chemical structure will take time and equipment— neither of which I've got." She tossed the folder on Nick's desk, where he whisked it up. "At least it's something."

The door to Stonetree's office opened and he stepped into the squad room. He nodded to Natalie. "Dr. Lambert. Anything on that syringe?"

"We're just discussing it now, Captain," said Nick.

Stonetree nodded again, his grim expression immovable. "Good. Keep discussing it until you get something. In the meantime, I need Schanke to run as liaison for Narcotics."

"Me?" Schanke all but fell from the desk and pointed at Nick. "But I found the syringe. What about Nick?"

"He just brought in something— the lab's got it." Stonetree met Nick's gaze. "You think you should wait for that to come through?"

"Possible prints?" Nick paused, then nodded, catching Natalie's eyes. "Yeah, I'd like to be here. It might help me narrow down the list of suspects."

"So you've got a list. That's good." Stonetree waved his hand toward Schanke. "Come on— I've got 'em on the phone. They won't bite."

Schanke paused, leaning low over Nick's desk. "That's the clue— you've got prints? What— of that Mercer guy you had everybody checking?"

"Schanke?"

Taking a deep breath, Schanke flashed a subservient smile at Stonetree, then turned back to Nick and pointed his finger at him again. "You stay there, okay! We need to talk about this. I need to know about clues and... stuff like suspects."

"And syringes?" asked Nick, leaning forward, so he could watch Schanke being drawn to Stonetree's office, almost by magic.

Stonetree's expression had gotten even darker. "You haven't been throwing your weight around about taking this case from Narcotics, have you?" he asked, as Schanke entered the office. The precinct captain began to close the office door behind them. "Because I've got Narcotics on the line and they're pretty upset—"

Even though the door was closed quietly, Natalie winced. "He *has*, hasn't he? Been throwing it back in their faces?"

Nick shrugged and turned back to her report. "Who knows what happens on day shift? But the odds are— in spades."

Wincing again, she took up Schanke's position on the corner of the desk. "And what about *your* clue?"

"It's a crystal glass, with prints." He closed the file and leaned back, fingers to his temple. "I've got a second one for you. It's got blood in it."

Natalie looked over her shoulder, then realized that their conversation couldn't be overhead. "The one you sent to the print lab—"

"Had blood in it, too. I transferred the blood to yours, then wiped the inside clean, rinsed it with whiskey. They won't find anything inside that glass. It's the prints on the outside that I want."

"And this might be our killer?" Natalie took a deep breath. "Nick, if you've broken chain of evidence on this one, we'll never get a conviction."

"We'll never get a suspect." He shot her a glance then looked away, unable to face her. "You were right— he's one of us."

She didn't speak for a moment and he was just as glad. It was something neither one of them really wanted to face— the possibility that a case might come up where both of them would be forced to break most of the oaths they'd made to save their own lives... and the secret of the vampires' existence in Toronto.

"Is it this 'Mercer' Schanke mentioned?"

He nodded, slowly. That was information he wouldn't have volunteered. The less Natalie knew, the better. But she'd never be satisfied with 'less.' It was one of the things about her that intrigued him so. "I met him an hour ago."

"You're not telling me he confessed? No wonder your kind don't need a police force."

He smiled at her joke, but it was a grim smile. "No, he didn't confess. And yes, we have a 'police force.' Of sorts."

That was something else he liked about Natalie— she knew when he wanted her to let something alone. And she usually also knew when she should and shouldn't heed that warning. This time, she simply looked away, across the squad room. "Then how do you know he's involved?"

"The smell." When she looked back at him quickly, he took another deep breath and said, "There was a smell on the corpse you had me look at— a faint, sweet smell. I smelled it again, tonight. He had a bottle of human blood. I smelled it in his glass. And on his breath, when I spoke to him."

"A... smell."

"A smell."

Natalie made a *tsk-tsk* sound with her lips. She reached down and began playing with the stapler on his desk. "I don't think we could get an indictment with a smell, never mind a conviction. The prints—"

"Are pointless. I can't go the legal route with this one."

"*We* can't go the legal route with this one," she corrected.

He was ready to protest, when he recognized something in *her* tone— and knew enough to back down. He simply stared at her, then shrugged and leaned back in the chair again.

Natalie hadn't met his eyes, she was still toying with the stapler, but her shoulders had relaxed somewhat, now that it seemed he wasn't about to protest her involvement. When she finally looked at him, he was confused— her eyes were guarded. "How's Janette?"

He fought to keep himself very, very still. "Fine."

"Because, you said she was shaken up, by that vampire— you know. In the back room of the club."

"Yeah." He tried a nonchalant shrug and failed. "She's over that."

"Okay." Natalie looked down at the stapler in her hands, then placed it on top of the desk. "On the glass you've got for me— the fingerprints belong to Janette, don't they?"

She was far too clever by half. "Yes. If you find any, they'll be Janette's."

"So she's *not* all right?"

"No."

Natalie rose from the edge of the desk and smoothed down her skirt. "I guess you left the glass in your car.?"

"Front seat." Nick cleared his throat and started to rise. "Nat, I—"

But then she looked at him. And his voice died with any protestations still on his lips.

"Just promise me that you won't lie to me. Not to protect *me*. Not to protect *you*. Not to protect... someone else. We've got to know we can trust one another, Nick." There was a sadness in her eyes as she added, "That's all we *can* know."

In another place, another time, he would have swept her into his arms. He would have made her a princess, dressed her in fine silks, surrounded her with the luxury of an age. And he would have placed her on a pedestal, afraid to touch her too often and too long, afraid that it would all come crashing down when the blood and the light came between them.

But that wasn't possible. He would have to settle for being her friend and hope against hope that she would settle for being his. That meant she was right about trust being the only thing they *could* have. For now.

"I'll try," he promised.

"I know you will."

She smiled and turned to leave, but Nick caught her hand, stopping her. She faced him and he dropped her hand almost instantly. "The smell...: I found it someplace else," he admitted.

He saw the light in her eyes, the curiosity and the immediate reinforcement of the promise he'd just made. "Where?"

"On Janette. And—" He picked up the stapler from the desk. The spring unlatched beneath his fingers and the staples tumbled onto the blotter pad. "On the vampire at the Raven. The one who burned."

Part 7: In which Janette makes a decision

Standing before the glass door to the balcony, Janette checked her reflection. Powder blue had never been a color that suited her, but when patterned with the royal blue fleur-de-lis and the cream color blouse, the skirt looked lovely.

"What do you think we should do today?" she asked, her eyes moving past the reflection and outward, to the gold and red line that shimmered on the eastern horizon. "Another trip to the park and the dock?"

Gregory didn't answer her. She glanced over her shoulder to make certain he was still there, brooding in a chair, at the darkest part of the apartment, the furthest he could get from the window.

She tried on her pout in the reflection, looking for one that was enticing and provocative. What was wrong with Gregory? Or had something changed about her? He'd certainly been interested in her last evening, holding her close and drinking her blood till she thought he would drain her dry.

Janette's fingers rested at the side of her throat and she shivered. The marks were gone— healed almost instantly, when Gregory had given her a glass of blood, mixed with sunshine. But the memory of his passion lingered. Perhaps he *was* the wounded party.

She walked over to where he sat in the darkness. Gregory barely moved at her approach, his eyes shifting to follow her, but his hands remained held together before him, thumbs intertwined, almost as if he were praying.

"That's the steeple," whispered Janette, slipping behind the chair. Leaning forward, she placed her arms around his neck and bent the fingers. "That's the church. It's a children's game."

He shook his hands free of hers, resting them on the arms of the chair. "We're no longer children, are we?"

She ran her fingers through his hair, but he brushed her away again. "You're cross with me?" she accused, walking back toward the balcony door. Looking down at her hands, Janette realized that she desperately wanted a cigarette for the first time in days.

"Not with you. With the situation." Gregory's voice was taut. Did she detect a note of fear? Certainly not annoyance— she knew well enough what that sounded like. "Why didn't you tell me about your 'Nicola'?"

Smiling to herself, Janette paused at the window. Now jealousy she *could* understand! "He's an old friend. I helped to bring him across. There is nothing more between us, truthfully. He has... other interests."

"You never mentioned him. Or that he was a police detective."

Shrugging, she turned and picked up the glass of warm blood that she'd left cooling on the bar countertop. "I didn't think it was important. There was you. And me."

"And the blood?"

Sipping the liquid, she closed her eyes and tilted back her head. "Mmmmm. And the blood."

"Actually, your Nicola's presence might save me some time. And energy." For the first time since the last evening, he actually seemed to register her presence. "I think, dear Janette, it is time I made clear my terms."

"Terms?" she asked dreamily. Raising her glass to him, she closed her eyes and began to sip.

The glass was gone, wrenched from her hand. Her eyes shot open. Gregory's fingers wrapped around hers, holding her, while he placed the glass back on the bar with his free hand. "Terms," he repeated sternly. "I think you've had a free ride long enough."

"What are you talking about? Let me go!"

As Janette began to struggle, he released her. She ran to balcony doors, planning to fly away, but the sun was rising. She couldn't fly until dusk returned. Her eyes went back to meet his.

And Gregory's smile, which had been so charming, now seemed sinister. "We need to have a serious discussion, Janette. If you sit down, you might be more comfortable."

He gestured toward a chair on the darker side of the room. In defiance, she flounced to the white sofa and seated herself primly. At least she could bask in the sunlight until this silliness ceased. What could be wrong with Gregory?

"Thank you," he said, never indicating that she had done anything but what he'd asked. Opening a panel in the bar, he withdrew a bottle. She recognized the color even through the green glass— it was human blood, the scent, once he flipped off the cork with an opener, was unmistakable. But it was not the special blood like the glass he'd taken from her, the blood that let her walk in the sunshine.

"You have to understand that my little discovery," Gregory gestured toward her glass on the countertop, as he poured himself a goblet of blood, "is expensive to produce. Each bottle takes two mortals. The process that brings such freedom to us is fatal to them. But then, when have they ever mattered?"

Raising his glass to her, he said "*Salute*," before sipping from it.

"I care for mortals as little as you," said Janette. The light from the balcony beckoned her, distracted her, taunted her to come out and play. Worse, she could hear the birds singing, wheeling in the sky outside. "But you know the rules. This world is too... modern. Deaths are difficult to explain. Too many and the—" She shuddered at even thinking of the Enforcers.

Then her gaze moved back to the window. What would the Enforcers think of her dalliance in the daylight?

When she looked back to Gregory, he nodded. "Yes, you too have enjoyed the fruit of my labor. They wouldn't look kindly upon you, would they? Unless... we were protected. If there were a way to distribute my elixir in a controlled setting, we could choose whom to initiate, whenever we wished. And in return—" Eyes sparkling, he sipped from his bloody goblet again. "In return, we could ask whatever price we liked. Money buys power, protection, even from the Enforcers. We could harvest the mortals as we wished, build up sufficient stock for several months, and expand the operation. Eventually, we will be too important to the vampire community for the Enforcers to stop us. If they're smart, they'll shift their allegiance to us."

For a moment, she couldn't see the light, couldn't see anything but the greedy eyes that reflected red from the glass of blood he held before him. "You want to extort money from our kind? You want to use others of our kind to make your fortune?"

"Money talks," said Gregory, before setting aside his own glass.

"Now, mortals, I really don't care what happens to them." Rising from her seat, Janette returned to the window. "But to use our kind for financial gain?" Holding her arms across her chest, she shuddered, even as the warm sun beat down upon her flesh. "It's monstrous."

"But I don't want to use all of them, not at once," admitted Gregory, from behind her. "I only want to use... you."

Janette whirled. "Me? But what good would I be to you?"

"Not you, specifically. Your club." Gregory's smile disappeared. "Dear Janette, your price for daylight will be The Raven. I want it."

"No," she said instantly, turning away, back to face the glass and the warmth of the light. "I— no."

"It's the perfect place," whispered his voice, seductive and appealing. "We could begin slowly, as I said. Build a steady clientele. We'd be wealthy beyond Midas. And we'd expand, over time. We'd have our entire race begging for our gifts. And you could be beside me. You know that end of the operation. You could run things."

As he spoke, she considered his offer. Would it be so bad, really? He said she could still run the club. And she'd have more attention than even she could handle. The youngest and most beautiful vampires would court her, as well as the old and wealthy. They would wait on her every whim, every mood, just to taste the liquid sunshine that would let them walk with her in the light.

And Nicola... would get his wish. Not to be mortal, surely, but to be as close as he might come for their kind.

"What about... Nicola?" she whispered.

"He could join us, if he wished. Having someone on the police force to muddle cases, hide disappearances of runaways or vagrants— he could be very useful. And he'd be handsomely repaid."

"Money isn't important to him." Turning, she leaned against the warmth of the glass door. How she would have loved a cigarette right now! "And he has this *thing* about honor. It used to be all the rage. But, that was before your time, isn't it?"

"Times have changed, pet. If Nicola wants, he's in. Otherwise... I'll have to do something about him. And as for you." Shrugging, he walked away, to the chair that sat in the darkest corner of the room. Seating himself, his eyes held hers the while. "Make your choice, Janette. Belong to me and walk in the sun or keep your club and lose the light."

It was his choice of words that decided her. She was the owner of The Raven. With LaCroix gone, she belonged to no man or vampire, only to herself. Even the daylight at her back, that warmed her shoulders, would be a prison if she accepted Gregory as her master.

Drawing herself to her full height, she stalked toward him, but he waved his hand, stopping her in the center of the room.

"No— don't tell me now. Think about it. You have one more day of light to enjoy. And then the night. And then a day without the light. Compare them. I'll contact you tomorrow night, tell you where to meet me."

"My answer will be *no*," she answered coldly. "It is 'no' now and shall remain 'no'. The Raven is mine."

He shrugged. "Forgive me if I phone, on a whim. I think, perhaps, you might change your mind."

"Never," spat Janette. She turned at the door, adding, "I hope you have sufficient breeding never to enter The Raven again."

"I won't," promised Gregory. "Until it belong to me."

His laughter echoed as she slammed the door to his apartment behind her. She ran down the hall to the elevator, ignoring the well-dressed woman walking a leashed poodle and the delivery man burdened with flowers. She only wanted to get away from Gregory and from this place.

It wasn't until she was out on the street and stepped back into the full light of day that she began to regret her decision. Birds whirled overhead, the cars honked at one another, and blue skies were filled with fluffy white clouds.

But beyond all that, Gregory's laughter still sounded in her ears.

Part 8: In which Natalie has a blast

The first hour of the two that remained between him and the dusk was so dark and dim that Nicholas moved easily, without the burden of the sun. The press of sweaty, terrified bodies, carts, and animals were moving north and out of London, not south. He was one of the few who turned down Eastcheap, then Philpot Lane.

The sky was no less dark, but fewer of the buildings were alight. The Belgian wind, still rising from the south, was threatening to spread the fire further north and east. Occasionally, clean air assaulted his nostrils and he breathed deeply, welcoming the coolness like some long, lost friend.

Twice he found himself accosted, once by one of the ministers from nearby St. Botolph's who grabbed his sleeve, as he did the sleeve of every able-bodied man who passed by. "For God's grace, please help us, sir. Stay and fight the fire! Do not forsake your church in her hour of need!"

Nicholas shook off the old man's grip. He turned to face him, but averted his eyes— the white falling bands worn over the plain black designated the parson as a man of God, which drove a different kind of fire into his soul. "God's already forsaken me, sir. I'm returning the favor." As the parson's face fell, a twinge of pity touched his cold heart and he added, "Take the chapbooks and the plate north, while you can. By dawn your church will be a ruin."

The elderly parson backed away quickly. "God have mercy on your soul," he whispered, staring at Nicholas with haunted eyes, then running to plead with some other stranger.

He had almost reached his destination— the Ram's Horn tavern— when a man, terrified and babbling, ran headlong into him. The man grabbed his shoulders and began speaking rapidly in Dutch. "Help me, please!" he cried in terror. "The mob will kill me! They think I set the fire."

Four young toughs emerged from the crowd and approached them. "That's him!" cried one loudly. "That's the foreign papist! He set the fire. He's a spy. A papist spy!"

Nicholas felt his anger rising, but it was still a half hour before darkness fell. He was the equal of any mortal man, but only that— an equal. Against the four street bullies out for blood, what could he hope to accomplish? The accused was probably innocent, but what should it matter to him? He had to find Janette.

On the brink of abandoning the man to his fate, Nicholas caught the eye of one of the city's civil guards, who was fighting the flames of a warehouse across the street. The guard nodded to Nicholas, the gesture one of subservience, and he realized that the cut and cost of his clothing marked him as a wealthy gentleman, even in this mob.

Pulling the accused from behind, Nicholas said, "These men claim this man set the fire and that he's a papist spy. Surely he should be imprisoned until these charges can be investigated. The fire comes first, does it not?"

The accused man turned fearful eyes to him, but Nicholas pulled him closer, whispering in Dutch, "You'll be safe in the hands of the guard— they'll release you in the morning." Then he repeated the words in English, to appease the guard.

"God's grace fall upon you, sir," whispered the man.

Privy to their conversation, the guard eyed the toughs, then grasped the poor victim by the back of the collar. "I'll take custody of this papist, sir. He won't escape the King's justice." Again, he glared at the toughs. "You can tell he's a papist. All able-bodied men not fighting the fire would have to be papists, not wanting to see the city saved."

The rough young men began grumbling, deprived of their sport, but they quickly melted into the crowd, getting the message. It was then the guard turned back to him. "You're not a local, sir. Are you looking for family?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Nicholas half–smiled, realized that his worried expression would have betrayed him. "There's a woman, named Janette, she's staying at the Ram's Horn tavern."

The guard shook his head. "That's not part of my watch—I don't know of the lady. Most of the taverns along the Thames burned this morning. Janette?" He tasted the word in his mouth. "She's French? A courser?"

Nicholas held back a smile, knowing how Janette would react if the civil guard had called her a prostitute. "No. She's well-born."

"Your pardon, sir." The guard had manners and the wits to know when to use them. He gestured down Botolph Street, toward Thames Street, where yellow smoke rose beside the black. "That's where the tavern is. And if you find your lady, keep an eye on her. This is the third 'papist spy' we've rescued." Having released his grip on the accused spy's shoulder, he nodded toward the man. "Poor bastards don't speak the King's tongue— they're spies, plain and simple. Fires have got all of 'em rattled, but the common street folk are the worst."

"They've got the most to lose," agreed Nicholas. Suddenly, his eyes began to take in the fire in a whole new light— he saw not only businesses and churches burning, but homes. London was crowded to over-flowing before, but after the fire, what would happen to the poor? Where would they go? The churches, the wealthy, the government could rebuild... but the poor would spend the winter in alleys and streets, if they ever came back to London.

"I hope you find your French lady," said the guard, tipping his cap to Nicholas. "Just watch for the mobs, sir. Stay away from the river."

"I plan to. Thank you." Nicholas grasped the Dutch man's shoulder as well when they parted, accepting the man's thanks with a nod, but no words. The common folk might be wary of foreigners, but all of the English were wary of the French and Nicholas knew a slip of the accent LaCroix had drilled him into hiding might well mean he'd spend the night as a guest of the King's justice.

The darkness was close enough to taste. Even though the sun had not yet set, the sky was black as pitch, lit only by the hellish flames and the yellow smoke.

And somewhere, in that mass of fire, and refugees, and angry mobs, was Janette.

* * *

His senses screamed of daylight. Nick fell from the couch, fully clothed, and scrambled to his feet, eyes gold and fangs bared.

"Nick!" shrieked Natalie, who was standing by the window. "It's me!"

He saw instantly what had happened— she had opened the shades on the windows a crack. Turning away from her, he took a deep breath, trying to drive back the fear. "Natalie, don't ever do that. For your own safety."

"Okay, I know now. I know." He closed his eyes, hearing her steps behind, and breathed deeply again. By the time her hand touched his shoulder, he was himself. "Nick?"

He spun and grabbed her hand. She would have jumped back from fright if his grip hadn't held her.

"Don't ever do that," he said firmly, staring into her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Releasing her, he walked away from the couch and accidentally kicked an empty bottle across the floor. He looked up at her and saw her eyes follow the bottle. "Evidently not," she answered. "Bad dreams?"

"Daymares." Squinting at the windows, he checked his estimate of the daylight left on the clock. "You're here early." Then he focused on her, seeing the dark circles under her eyes. "You haven't slept."

"I have." She tilted her chin upward defiantly, but wilted under his stare. "All right, a couple of hours. But wait'll you see what I found!"

She'd unpacked a small kit of items on the table by the window, but all of her instruments, test tubes and slides were sitting in shadow. Waving him out of the way of the light, Natalie stood on the darker side of the table. Picking up an eyedropper, she dropped a bit of red fluid on a slide. "Okay, so this is vampire blood."

"Whose?"

"Yours." When he raised an eyebrow, she added, "I've got some stashed from previous tests. Don't worry, it's well hidden. So, we put this in sunlight—"

Natalie picked up the slide with a pair of forceps and held the slide in the light. Nick was forced to shield his eyes as the blood sizzled, then the slide cracked, falling out of the forceps. "Nice trick."

"You should see what I do for birthday parties." Cleaning off the forceps, she pointed to another red test tube. "Now this one is that blood sample you brought me—which happens to match what little I could scrape out of those four overdose victims—mixed with vampire blood. Yours," she added quickly, before he could ask.

Again, she dropped the blood onto the glass slide and used the forceps to hold it in the light.

Nick stared at it, but nothing happened. He looked at Natalie, who was grinning from ear to ear, then back to the sample. "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"You big dummy!" She struck him in the shoulder with her free hand. "It's vampire blood in *sunlight*."

It took him a moment to understand just what he was looking at. He stared, waiting for something to happen.

"It's inert," explained Natalie. "I won't bore you with the details, but your wonder drug, when injected in the human body, invades the entire bloodstream with an enzyme that transforms the blood. It also happens to kill the human. If the blood is removed from the body within a certain period of time, and then a vampire drinks that blood—"

"The vampire could withstand sunlight." Nick almost reached out to take the slide from the forceps, but couldn't because Natalie was still holding it under the beam of light let in through the shutter. He looked at her in wonder. "How?"

She made an 'o' with her mouth, whistled lightly for a moment or two, then shrugged. "Beats me. Like I said, we've got no definitive rules on vampire anatomy. My best guess would be that the drug-enhanced blood acts like a sort of sunlight battery. It stores the sunlight, preventing decay."

"So what would release this stored-up sunlight?"

"Hey, I only call 'em as I see 'em. The only way this thing works at all is because the enzymes have one reaction in the human body, then another reaction in the vampire body. What happens after the fact—?" She shrugged again.

Nick turned away. "So Mercer injects his victims, or finds victims desperate enough to inject themselves, with the drug. He waits until they die, then suctions out the blood and stores it—" a memory of the crystal bottle flashed in his mind and he snapped his fingers, "In crystal!"

"Could be," said Natalie, hesitantly. "The reflective properties of crystal, higher purity than glass." Then she shook her head and started gathering up bits of the broken slide from the table. "So what are you going to do about Janette?"

"What about Janette?"

"If she's been drinking the blood supplied by Mercer, what happens when the supply gets cut off? Is she going to want to stop her daytime jaunts?"

Nick stared at her. "She's been in the light." He walked away again, to the couch, tasting the words, trying on the idea. "Janette's been walking in the light. The new dress, the way she's been acting... she's been in the light."

He whirled. "Nat, do you know what this means!"

"Ow!"

"What?" He walked back to the table quickly. Natalie was holding her finger, which was sliced along the ball of the tip. "Cut myself on the broken glass. It's okay, it's a clean cut. I wasn't near any of the solu—"

The sizzling noise started low, but grew. They found themselves staring at the inert slide, which was no longer inert ... now that pure human blood had fallen on it. "Back!" cried Nick, pushing Natalie aside and shielding her with his body.

The small slide flared hot and bright behind them and then shattered, sending glass everywhere. Nick rose from the floor and offered Natalie a hand up, but his eyes were fixed on the charred spot on the table.

"Nick, I'm sorry," began Natalie. "Geez, I bet it was an antique. I'll pay for it. Not all at once, I can take some money out of my check every week, but—"

He placed his hand on her shoulder, still starting at the table. The room was growing darker, the light coming through the blinds fainter. "I don't care about the table," he said flatly. "Natalie, does that happen only in sunlight? Or would that happen whenever a vampire drank human blood after drinking Mercer's brew?"

"I don't know. But—" She walked toward the table and picked up her forceps, carefully pushing aside bits of glass from the blackened area. "What about your visitor? The spontaneous combustion? It would have been dark, after sunset. He wasn't in sunlight. You said he drank the blood Janette was holding, and then he began to burn."

"Blood burns in the light," repeated Nick. "That's what he meant. Vampire blood exposed to the light burns when the vampire returns to regular human blood. The enzyme isn't there... and the light is released, all at one time."

"*Ooooh*. Sunburn from the inside out," commented Natalie. Then she dropped the forceps and grabbed his arm. "Nick, if Janette was drinking that stuff— does she know? Does she know what it could do to her?"

"I don't think so. She wouldn't have continued. Janette has a very strong instinct for self-preservation. Mercer probably didn't tell her what could happen." He remembered Janette falling and how he'd caught her. "Her skin was warm, she was burning up. She said she was hungry— and then Mercer showed up with a bottle of his special blend. He offered to let me try it." Natalie's hand dropped from his arm and he smiled at her reassuringly. "I declined. As you can see by the evidence."

Her gaze went to the bottle by the couch. "Which means, she's probably going to be hungry again. Soon."

"I'll warn her," said Nick, heading for the door.

Behind him, Natalie called, "I'll follow—" but her words were swept away by the wind. The sun had set and he was gone, out the door and flying to The Raven, hoping in his heart that Janette hadn't begun to burn.

Part 9: In which Janette goes on the wagon

Her office was a mess. Janette leaned against the doorjamb and yawned, staring with dismay at the papers already beginning to pile on top of her blotter. She so liked a clean desk. But she knew very well that taking time off to play meant she'd have to pay, sooner or later.

The fur coat was lying on the floor near the desk, where she'd thrown it at Nicola the evening before. Walking over to it, she picked it up and draped it over her shoulders, luxuriating in the feel of the fur beneath her fingers. It wasn't a bad fur. In fact, she was still rather fond of it. She'd been annoyed at Nicola— that's why she'd taunted him. Now she would have to be magnanimous. But to send the coat as a gift to his little coroner friend would be seen as a challenge. She was too tired for challenges.

Yawning again, Janette wandered from the office into her boudoir. It was time for a drink, to quell the gnawing hunger in the pit of her stomach, then she'd nap through tonight, and the daylight tomorrow. Her work could wait a little longer.

There was a bottle of her private stock warming in the compartment of her boudoir cabinet. Smiling, she took the bottle out and glanced at the label. Alma might be a silly, vengeful thing, but she did attend to her duties. For now, Janette would accept the gesture as a peace offering, rather than as Alma intended—pointing out that Janette's fling could last no longer than two nights.

Taking a glass from the cabinet, she noticed that two of the set were missing, and frowned. They would be difficult to replace. Had one of her fledglings taken them, or was Alma having private parties and trying to hide the evidence?

Then again, did it matter? The fur still around her, she sank to the deep plush carpeting of the floor, glass in hand, her back against the heavy wooden cabinet. When the glass was held up to the dim light, it looked tasteless and uninviting. The brilliant red of Gregory's special blood, as well as the fine taste, still haunted her.

As did the daylight it had given her.

Propping the glass against her knee, she stared across the darkened room. The changing screen and mirror, the tapestries, the fine art and furniture— none of it compared to the warmth of the sunshine and the open blue sky. Closing her eyes, she pictured the birds, of all shapes and sizes, wheeling and turning, calling to one another with songs of love, or threat, or common gossip. The birdsong lingered in her ears, the warmth still touched her skin. Could she really give that up? Could it be so bad to give him The Raven? Could it be so bad to accept a master for eternity, after having a brief taste of freedom, if it meant walking in the light?

Opening her eyes, Janette sighed and looked at the glass of blood again. No. Whether or not Gregory called, the answer would still be no. She was her own mistress now, subject to no whim or will but her own. If it meant eternity without sunlight, then so be it. She'd lived so many centuries without the light, how bad could eternity be?

Frowning, she raised the glass to her lips—

The door to her boudoir blew inward, as if from an explosion. She saw Nicola in the doorway, framed in shadow, then he was beside her before she could do more than blink. He struck the glass of blood from her hand and it flew, shattering against the wall, the glass fragments and blood raining onto the carpet.

Rage coursed through her. She saw him through a golden haze and her fangs were in place as she hissed, "How *dare* you!"

Nicola's roar silenced her. Cowed by the fierce gold in his eyes, she backed down immediately, going limp as he placed one hand on her shoulder and hauled her to her feet. "Did you drink any?" he snarled.

She had seen Nicola in a rage before and knew enough to be frightened. Her fangs withdrew and the gold fled her vision as she stared up at him. "No. I—"

He released her and turned away. Janette caught the edge of the cabinet to keep from falling, then pressed herself into the small space between the cabinet and the corner of the wall, trapped. If there was some way to distract him, get past him—

But when Nicola turned back, the rage and the gold was gone from his eyes. He reached forward, pulling her from her hiding place, and held her close, folding his arms around her.

"I was in time," he breathed. "Oh, Janette. It was so close this time. So very close."

Normally, she would have enjoyed the situation, but she was bewildered and hungry. Planting her hands against his chest, she pushed away, just far enough so that she could face him, but without breaking his embrace. "Nicola, what are you doing? You've gone mad, haven't you?" When he smiled, she sighed and shook her head. "I told you this business about trying to be human would push you over the edge. Oh, what will we do with you?"

He laughed, picking her up in his arms and twirling her about for a few turns. "What will I do with *you*, Janette," he said, a note of exasperation in his tone. Then, lowering her to her feet, his expression grew serious. "Where were you today?"

The words flew to her lips— an offhand, flippant remark— and died there, unspoken. Looking in his eyes, she saw that he knew the truth. She lowered her gaze, looking at the bloody stain on the wall, at her tapestries, at anything, except Nicola. "Oh, can you forgive me?" she whispered. "You have wanted it for so long. And I... it was given to me."

He placed his finger beneath her chin and turned her face toward him. "You walked in the light."

There was no accusation in his words, no anger. Startled, she stared back at him, seeing only joy, understanding, and, perhaps, a touch of envy.

It was the envy that stung. "Yes. I walked in the light."

Saying the words aloud brought back every sensation. Suddenly, she pushed away from him, as the memory of the warm sunlight tingled on her bare arms. Walking back to the cabinet, she picked up one of her cigarette holders, then opened the gold and diamond case that held her cigarettes. "And I will never walk in the sunlight again. It was Gregory. He had this blood... it protected us from the sun. But he wants The Raven. He wants... me. And I won't give it to him. I'd rather spend eternity in darkness."

Once the cigarette was lit, she raised the holder to her lips and inhaled. The smoke tasted strange in her mouth. But it was a comfort to see the gray swirls in the air as she exhaled. "It's over, Nicola. His price for the sunlight is too high."

"Much too high," agreed Nicola. He walked toward her and placed a hand on her upper arm. "Janette, remember that vampire two nights ago?"

"The night I met Gregory." She took another drag from the cigarette, fighting back the shiver. "Oh... yes. A bad night. An evil night."

"Natalie and I think he was one of Mercer's clients. We think he walked in the light."

The cigarette holder nearly fell from her hand to the carpet, but Nicola caught it. She felt the hysteria rise in her as she remembered the gaunt face of the starved vampire, his whispery voice, and how he had crawled toward her, burning, the fire consuming his flesh and his existence. "Oh... no," she whispered, staring at Nicola in horror. "No, that must not happen. I won't burn. Nicola, I can't *burn*!"

Janette barely noticed that he was holding her again, making comforting noises, as she screamed silently inside. Her voice remained low, there was too much terror inside her for volume. "I *won't* burn. You must stake me first, and take my head. I won't burn, Nicola. You mustn't let me burn! You *must* promise!"

"I won't stake you," said Nicola. "And I won't let you burn. I promise, Janette. I won't let you burn." He leaned back, so that she could meet his eyes and see that he spoke the truth.

"What am I to do?" she whispered, her voice very small and far away. There was only Nicola and the promise in his eyes. It kept her sanity from fleeing into a red and terrible abyss. "Oh, Nicola, what am I to do?"

There was a slight tap on the doorjamb. Janette looked up and saw Alma standing in the doorway, lips pursed and eyes hooded. Behind her was Natalie Lambert. Janette noticed that at least Natalie had the decency to lower her gaze to the floor, obviously embarrassed.

"She was looking for Detective Knight," said Alma, her tone neutral. "I thought you might—"

"It's fine, Alma," said Nicola. He released Janette, but his left arm stayed around her shoulders, as if protecting her. "Nat, I think we'd better adjourn to the office. This seems a little public."

Alma hesitated. "Go away!" hissed Janette. "And— have someone take care of that!" She pointed toward the pieces of the door that were scattered around the room.

"Um, right." Alma's lips twisted into a snide smile. "Someone might fall and... hurt themselves."

Standing up to Alma's intrusion sapped the last of Janette's reserves. She slumped and Nicola caught her. Placing a hand beneath her knees, he swept her into his arms with one motion, and carried her into the office. He rested her on the couch, as Natalie followed him into the room.

"Have you told her?" asked Natalie.

"Not all of it."

Janette looked from one to the other. There was concern emanating from Natalie, but she was certain most of that concern was for Nicola.

Nicola knelt beside the couch. "Janette, you won't burn... if you don't drink blood. Remember what happened to the vampire? When you offered him the blood, he didn't want to take it at first—"

"But he was starving," protested Janette. Then the words began to make sense. "Oh, Nicola, he *was* starving." She shivered and he seated himself on the couch beside her, his arm around her shoulder. "The burning... would be kinder."

"What happens?" asked Natalie. She walked over to the desk and leaned on the edge. "What happens if you can't... you know?"

"We can go mad," said Nicola, his voice low. Janette looked at him and saw that he, too, remembered the too-bright eyes of the vampire who had burned. "Instinct takes over completely and the intellect, the personality disappears, forever."

"It's why I worry when Nicola doesn't feed often enough," said Janette. She reached her hand out to touch the side of his face. "I do worry about you, Nicola. I may not seem to— it isn't my way— but I do."

He smiled, showing that he understood. And that he'd always known. For a moment, her hunger was abated by that smile. And, for a brief instant more, Janette wondered if his quest to tame that horrible beast by means other than blood wasn't as doomed to failure as she'd first thought.

"Which means we have to get you some of that special brew," said Natalie thoughtfully. "I can't make it— I've tried to produce it combining the chemical and donated blood, but that doesn't work. It has to be injected in a living human being."

"And that can't be done?" asked Janette.

Nicola was hiding a smile. "No. It kills mortals."

"And there's a problem with this?"

Nicola patted her hand, then glanced at Natalie, who was shaking her head in wonder. "Let's assume it's not an option. If we can't make our own, we go to the source. Does Mercer have stock on hand or does he make it up as he needs it?"

Janette stared at him. "I don't know. You never ask your host where dinner came from. It's impolite." She glanced over at Natalie again, and added, "We may be dead, but that's no excuse for a breech of good manners."

"Did Gregory drink the blood, too?" asked Natalie. "Because if he did—"

"He'd have to have his own supply," finished Nicola. "He had a glass here. I saw him. But he didn't drain his, like Janette did. That's why I was able to get you the sample."

"*You* took my glasses?" asked Janette. "Nicola, how could you? They're a set!"

"I'll replace them," he promised. "You can take it out of my paycheck." He never moved, even though Natalie made a strangled sound. If it wasn't for her serious expression, Janette would have assumed that the coroner was laughing.

"Janette, try to focus," asked Nicola. "When was the last time you saw Gregory drink?"

"This morning. Before I... left." Then, she paused, staring at the desk, trying to remember. "But... that was human blood. I could smell it."

"He drank human blood?" asked Natalie quickly.

Janette blinked. "Well, yes. It's what we do, dear."

"She means, other than the blood that let you walk in the sunlight," explained Nicola.

Rather resenting the long-suffering glance he gave Natalie, Janette pouted. But then a stab of hunger reminded her that she was in no position to play games. "That's all he drank. He had part of a glass here. Then nothing all night. Then the glass of human blood in the morning. Then I left."

Nicola looked at Natalie again. "And he didn't burn?"

"No. Well," said Janette, "he stayed in the apartment. I thought he was being melodramatic, but he wouldn't come into the light with me."

"He's got a cure. A way of protecting himself," said Natalie, her voice tinged with excitement. "If abstinence from any blood worked, then your visitor wouldn't have burned. No, he's got an antidote, all right. Something that drains off the light from the blood."

"Right." Nicola rose from the couch, his attention on Natalie. "Janette can give me the address. I'll go over there as soon as I check in."

"You're not taking Schanke?"

"Of course I'm not taking Schanke. I'll ditch him... somehow." He shrugged. "If there's an antidote, I'll find it. And if there isn't, there should at least be more blood around so she won't starve."

"*She* is very hungry," said Janette tersely. She usually didn't mind being the topic of discussion, but they could, at least, pay attention to her.

"You can't leave her here, Nick," said Natalie, frowning. "That's like leaving an alcoholic in a liquor store."

Janette crossed her arms defiantly. "I have willpower." When Nicola raised his eyebrow, she was forced to smile. "Well, most of the time."

"You're right," agreed Nick. "She'll stay at my place. There's less temptation there."

"I'll take her over," offered Natalie. "You check in at the station."

Janette glared at the coroner. "I *can* drive. And I don't think you car would be anywhere near as comfortable as mine."

"I'm more concerned with the willpower issue," said Nicola, glancing from one to the other. "And much as I admire your driving, Janette, I think I should take you over there myself. I don't want any unauthorized stops."

The hunger flared again. "You're treating me like a child!" she shouted, rising from the couch and facing him.

Nicola placed his hands on her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I'm trying to keep you from burning."

She winced, then sniffled. "Oh, Nicola. That is *so* cruel. Must you remind me?"

"If only to make you behave." He kissed her forehead, then gestured toward the door. "You might want to throw some things together. I need to speak with Natalie."

She was being dismissed. Janette didn't like being dismissed. But she was in no position to argue. Shooting Natalie a murderous glance, she drew herself up to her full height and stalked from her office, slamming the door behind her.

Someone was working on the other door to the boudoir. When she snarled at him, he fled.

Feeling slightly better, Janette removed her emergency traveling bag from her wardrobe and threw it onto the floor. She wouldn't need much, just a few things. And as the hunger lanced through her again, she decided the fewer, the better.

Part 10: In which Nick plays detective

The greetings Nick received as he walked into the station were warmer than usual. Hands in his pockets, he approached Schanke, who was at the main desk signing something on a clipboard. "What gives?" he asked.

"What gives?" Schanke turned, staring at him. "What *gives*? My partner—" Pointing to Nick so that everyone could see, he repeated loudly, "*My* partner, who has bagged a wanted fugitive from seven countries and three continents, wants to know *what gives*?"

"I'd be happy if you'd just answered the question."

Putting his arm around Nick's shoulder, Schanke led Nick back to their desks. A mountain of phone messages sat atop Nick's blotter, as well as several manila files and expanded files, rubber banded together. "You know how you thought those prints didn't check out?"

"They didn't," said Nick, picking up the stack of messages, still in shock. "I ran them through, myself."

"But only through *our* prints. They were forwarded onto Interpol, Scotland Yard, and the FBI. And that's what came back." Schanke pointed cheerfully to the stacks of files.

Nick barely hesitated, then began reading the names from the files. "Gregory Maitens. Gregor Marx. Greg Miles."

Schanke snorted. "Yeah, like that's going to fool anybody. He always uses the same first name."

"It's easier to remember that way," said Nick, without thinking, slipping the rubber bands off each file. "Murder, theft, extortion."

"They think he's into some Satanic blood fetish kind of thing," explained Schanke. He twirled his finger in the air. "Real nutcase. And he shouldn't be that tough to catch."

Nick looked up at him sharply. "Why not?"

"He's ninety years old."

"That young?" muttered Nick, going back to the files.

"Well, I think you could probably bring him down with a flying tackle," joked Schanke. "Then again, you probably won't have to. They should be bringing *him* in soon."

The files fell from Nick's hands. "They're *what*?"

"What do we care? It's gone higher up. But because of *my* partner's work, our names will have little gold stars next to them. By the way, where'd you get that glass with the prints on it?" Schanke picked up the department folder. "I didn't see an evidence tag for it, and the lab says they don't have one."

Nick grabbed Schanke's arm, trying to get his attention. "How do they know where to find Mercer?"

"Ran back account records under the other names, then traced the transfer of funds. One of them had a local apartment address." Schanke whistled, looking at the folder again. "Really swank place. And he's a real eagle, twelfth floor."

"The idiot," hissed Nick, beneath his breath. "He should have known better. *I* should have known better—"

"Hey, Nick, ease off," said Schanke. He threw the folder on the desk. "It's not our problem any longer. I can understand you're wanting to be in on the kill, but let's bask in the golden glow of the moment."

Picking up the stack of phone messages, Nick thrust them into Schanke's arms. "You bask," he said sharply. "I've gotta run."

Before Schanke had recovered, Nick was gone. He cared nothing about the phone messages scattering in his wake, only that mortal cops, from a variety of jurisdictions and nations, were going up against a vampire. And he wasn't certain to which of his own kind his loyalty belonged— the men of law enforcement or the children of the night.

He knew the address— he'd gotten it earlier from Janette— and landed half a block away, far enough away to avoid notice. When he arrived at the front of the hotel, he found a number of marked and unmarked cars. Lights were flashing, occasionally sirens wailed, and a cordon had been put up to keep interested civilians out of the way. There were no ambulances present, which was a good sign.

Making his way to the front of a police cordon, Nick flashed his badge at one of the patrolmen assigned to crowd control, then proceeded into the lobby. There seemed to be cops everywhere; uniforms, detectives, and even some of the local brass, were coordinating, interviewing, and searching the vast hotel.

He stuck with the elevator, rather than the stairs. He could fly faster than the machine moved, but there were too many cops around, too many search parties. They hadn't found Mercer yet. And he was just as glad.

At the door to the apartment, his badge was checked again. "What's it like?" he asked the young cop at the door, nodding toward the apartment.

The cop yawned. "Clean," he admitted. "You'd figure with all the brass we've got out tonight, there'd be some blood and thunder."

Nick forced a smile and tapped the young man on the shoulder as he passed. "Maybe we just got lucky."

He wandered the apartment as members of different forensics teams gathered evidence— vacuumed samples from the carpets, checked cabinets and doors, and fingerprinted every surface they could manage. With the others here, he couldn't search properly for the hidden places a vampire would stash valuables... and blood.

Past the kitchen and the bathroom was the bedroom. The bed was unmade, the covers disheveled. They were vacuuming the bed for fibers and evidence as well. The pillowcases and sheets were being bagged and tagged. He leaned closer, watching one of the forensics people carefully making a notation about a pillowcase— Nick spotted the small bloodstain immediately. But to whom did it belong? Was Mercer the kind who liked to drink in bed, or had he and Janette shared blood from each other, as well as from the bottle?

Returning to the living room, he moved to the balcony. Janette had told him about her first few moments in the sunlight. He looked upward, but he couldn't spot any activity from the bird nests built on the undercarriage of the next balcony. Staring out across the city, he tried to remember what the non-lethal light could be like... and failed. It was so long ago. So very long ago.

"Knight?"

He turned when he heard his name called and moved back into the apartment. Captain Stonetree was walking toward him. "Captain."

"Guess Schanke filled you in."

"Most of it. I headed over as soon as I heard."

Stonetree nodded. "We missed him. I've got half a mind to call off this bunch and stake out the place. He might be back."

"No." Nick walked to the center of the living room, his eyes roaming over every service. How many might hold Janette's prints? Not that they'd ever be able to identify her by them— she'd never been fingerprinted, to his knowledge. "No, Captain. He's gone."

"You know something I don't?" asked Stonetree, his eyes hooded.

Nick turned to face him. "A hunch. Instinct."

"Your instincts are pretty good. I'd go with them." Stonetree frowned, again surveying the brightly lit, black and white room, that swarmed with gray, and brown and blue. "Which means we're gonna be here a while. You go back to the station, finish that evidence tag for the prints. The FBI was grumbling about that earlier."

Nick licked his lips as Stonetree turned away. "Uh, Captain? About that evidence tag?"

Stonetree turned, fixing him with a steady gaze. "Yeah?"

"I got a tip. I followed him here."

"You've been in here before? Without a warrant?"

Nick hung his head. "Yeah. He was in the back room. I took the glass from the bar— over there." He pointed out the teak bar with the glass top, that stood to one side of the balcony. "He never knew I was here. And we had nothing. I figured, if I could establish his identity, maybe we could set up some sort of deal, a sting."

"Yeah. But who knew he had enough outstanding warrants to keep him locked up for a couple hundred years?" Stonetree paused, then nodded. "It broke the case. You write it up like that. I'll see what I can do about deflecting any heat off you. Yeah, it was a bad move. And sloppy. But it's not like we could use the prints as the basis for an indictment, even if it had been clean evidence. Just... don't do it again. I want to retire with an old age pension."

"Thanks, Captain." Heading back to the hallway, he breathed a sigh of relief. His cover had held by sheer luck and the fact that his discovery had activated a dozen different cases from around the world. If the evidence had been needed to make the case... resigning from the force would have been the best of his options.

Making his way to the lobby, he walked over to a pay phone on the wall and dialed his apartment phone. It rang, and he waited through his message. "Pick up, Janette. It's me."

The receiver was lifted. "So, it's you. Making sure I've been a good girl?"

"You couldn't have answered if you weren't."

"Oooh, Nicola!"

Smiling, he said, "I'm sorry. That wasn't nice. Any messages for me?"

"Yes. Natalie called." Janette paused. "She said she has tried other bloods, even... cow. There is nothing on which I can feed. Nicola, I'm so very hungry. Can't you bring me something?"

He could hear the hunger in her voice and knew that this was only the beginning for her. It would be worse later unless they found the antidote... or Mercer's stash. "He's gone, Janette. I was just in his apartment. He's cleared out. Is there anywhere else he could have gone? Any place he mentioned?"

She was silent for a moment and when she answered, her voice was small. "No. But... he did say he would call me tomorrow night. That he would see if I had changed my mind and tell me where to meet him."

Nick placed the flat of his hand against the wall, knowing that to vent his rage against the lobby would put his fist through the plaster. Mercer wouldn't be calling to hear her answer— he'd be calling to confirm that she'd been destroyed. She wasn't supposed to know that blood would be dangerous to her. By tomorrow night she'd be ravenous, ready to sink her teeth into anyone or anything.

And if she was this cranky now...

"I'll have your calls forwarded from The Raven," he promised. "And I'll see what I can do about getting a line tap. Maybe we can find out where he is when he calls."

"He won't expect me to be there, will he?"

There was no sense in lying to her. "No. He won't. And that might give us the edge. We'll be able to meet with him. Negotiate."

"*Will* I be there, Nicola? When he calls?"

"If you're a good girl and don't drink anything while I'm gone."

He heard a low moan. "I'm trying. But it is so very hard."

"I know. I'll be there soon. I promise."

"Hurry, Nicola. I do not think I can do this without you."

The receiver was replaced. Nick hung up the phone, then found a very puzzled uniformed officer looking at him. "She just went on the wagon," he explained. "Tonight's her first night without a drink."

The man nodded, then gave him a sympathetic smile. "You're in for a long night tonight."

Nick shook his head, moving away from the phone. He didn't know how true his words were. What was worse, he had tomorrow to get through.

And for Janette, tomorrow would be a very long day.

Part 11: In which Janette considers cow

She'd crossed the apartment a hundred times, counted the bricks in the wall, run through the channels on Nicola's television, and even tried to catch up with her paperwork.

Janette glanced over her shoulder at the shredded paper on the floor. That last had been a disaster. Alma would have to send for new invoices, do a stock recount, send for new forms for the payroll taxes.

But Alma wouldn't mind doing it. The bar would be hers. Janette wouldn't be there any longer.

The steady burning inside her would flare angrily from time to time, growing from an angry fire into a raging torrent, leaving her helpless, unable to move, unable to do anything but feel the pain and hunger that ate and ate and ate until it consumed all of her.

Throwing herself on the couch, Janette dreaded her next bout with the fire. She glanced at the iron stairway that led to the second floor, where Nicola was sleeping. He had sat vigil with her by talking to her, telling her stories, making her talk about old times, old memories. It was difficult for him, sometimes... when LaCroix was mentioned. And his name was mentioned often. She hadn't realized how much a part of them he had been, the first and strongest part of their triangle. The ruler, the despot, the father, the teacher, the lover... he'd played so many roles. As had they all.

And after dawn had broken, when the worst of the spells began, Nicola had held her, even as she had writhed and twisted, begging him to stake her, to open the blinds and let in the sun, to give her blood— his blood, *any* blood— to end her torment. He'd held her tightly, so that she couldn't hurt herself. He'd pressed cold compresses to her forehead, stroked her hair, kissed her cheek.

They'd made it through the worst... for a while.

She'd pleaded and cursed, called him everything from lover to demon, used those old memories, and those not so old, to torment him as the hunger tormented her. Until she accused him of trying to kill her, as he'd killed LaCroix.

Nicola's anger had flared, then. Reason left him and his eyes, which had gone golden many times that night and morning, had outshone even the sun. He'd picked up the leg of a table that she'd broken earlier and raised it above her chest. She'd snarled back at him, daring him to plunge it into her heart, some small cool spot inside her fearing and hoping that she could enrage him beyond the morality that he held so dear, that code by which he'd chosen to live.

That was how far she was willing to go.

But he'd returned to himself too soon. Crying aloud, he threw away the table leg and backed away from her. And, as the hunger gnawed relentlessly inside her, she writhed on the floor and watched him flee upstairs, beyond her reach.

Janette twisted her hair around a finger and chewed at it, her eyes moving to the door to his bedroom. She'd checked on him not long ago— he'd fallen into an exhausted sleep. He'd trusted in her fear of the light to keep her from fleeing, but he could do no more for her. And she knew it would be some time before he would forgive her for pushing him as far as she had.

Slowly, she made her way up the stairs, not flying, but walking. Her feet were bare and she was wearing Nicola's silk bathrobe over her chemise— her clothing and stockings had been torn and discarded in one of their many tussles. She moved silently, so as not to wake him and was pleased to find the door hinges were oiled and did not creak.

Still half-dressed, Nicola was lying across the bed, the black silk sheets and pillows twisted around him, ripped and torn. His face was smooth and soft and innocent, marred only by the stubble of his beard. Her problem had left him no time for grooming. Her problem had left him no time for anything. For once, just as she had wished, he was completely and utterly hers.

And she had tried to destroy him.

Janette leaned her head against the doorway and watched him, afraid to sigh, afraid the sound would wake him. He had not slept much, if at all, the past few days. The sleep would do him good. And if she were quiet enough about it, he would never know. Not until he awakened.

She thought at first of drinking from him, of giving him her kiss one last time. It would be worth burning, to know that her lips had last touched his, her teeth had last stuck into the fleshy part of his neck, that the taste of his blood would fill her mouth. But who knew where that might lead? If he should taste her blood, would he be condemned to the same fate as she? Would Nicola burn?

She shuddered and a small sound escaped her lips. It was enough to cause him to stir. Like a statue, she froze in the doorway as he shifted in his sleep, noting that the scratches on his face and hands had already begun to heal. By sunset they would be gone.

And so would she. It saddened her a little, to think that even that little memory of her could not be held by him.

Turning, Janette made her way down the stairs, the cool iron against the soles of her feet pushing back some of the inner fire that consumed her. She stood and looked over his apartment— his paintings and mementos of his conquests... and failures. He was always even-handed, saving the best of triumph and defeat.

Standing there, she realized she had as little to show for so many centuries as he, perhaps less. She admitted that her faults were many, as she continued down the steps. She was vain and selfish. Her jealousy was formidable. And her greed and lust for blood and pretty things were common enough among her kind. She was not brave, or faithful, or humble, or all of those lovely things the church had demanded that she be so many centuries ago. Among the first to go had been chastity and purity. LaCroix had followed, not far behind.

Her eyes fixed on one of Nick's paintings. She had no art in her. She could not sing or draw or paint or write or dance or act or tell stories. There would be nothing left behind her, except the memories Nicola held of her and The Raven... until Alma's incompetence destroyed it. And then there would only be Nicola.

She knew this and still she made her way to the refrigerator. The door opened quietly and the bottles waited inside, equally silent. She lifted one, held it up to one of the dim lamps she'd allowed to remain lit, and looked at it.

It was cow. She knew it was cow. But at the moment it touched her lips, she knew it would be the grandest, coolest sensation she had ever felt. And it would be her last.

Janette twisted the cork from the bottle and placed it on top of the refrigerator. She lifted the bottle to drink—

And then she stopped. She sniffed at the bottle. And she frowned.

Hurriedly, she recapped it and placed it back in the refrigerator, closing the door and leaning against it. To think she was willing to end her existence with *cow* blood on her lips!

Shuddering, she chalked it up to another thing she owed Gregory. Wanting to see another dusk, wanting to be with Nicola and to feel the night air and drink the sweetest of blood was no longer enough. Hate would take her through. It would be hate that would carry away the pain, hate on which she would concentrate. The thought of destroying Gregory would be her salvation.

The phone rang and she stared for a moment, unable to place the sound. By the time she'd realized what it was and that Nicola might be awakened, the ringing had stopped and Nicola's message had run.

Natalie's voice came from the machine. "Nick, it's Natalie. I know, I'm supposed to be sleeping. But I wanted to help. And since I can't be there to spell you because—well, let's face it— I'm dinner on the hoof—"

Janette couldn't help but roll her eyes. She'd drink the cow blood before she'd drink Natalie. Not only would Nicola never forgive her, but... the woman worked with *dead* things. Even the thought of it made her nauseous.

"But I might have found something. That sample I took from Janette—?"

She rubbed her arm, even though the mark of the needle had already disappeared. She wouldn't have minded so much if Natalie hadn't seemed to enjoy spearing her with that medieval instrument.

"Well, I combined it with some of the test blood I'd created— your blood and the drugged human blood. It seems to cancel the effect. When I added human blood to the mix, I got no reaction. It still burns in sunlight, but no more than it ever did. My guess is Gregory took blood from Janette before he drank human blood. That's the antidote. Look, this tape's gonna end. Call me late—"

The tape clicked off in the machine. Janette stared at the blinking red light, trying to find sense in Natalie's words. Gregory had been in the sunlight; he had a glass of the special blood. But then, he'd bitten her. And he drank human blood.

She was his antidote.

And he would be hers.

But Nicola would stop her if he knew what she planned. Gregory was wanted for his crimes against mortals.

Janette hesitated for only a second, but then she pressed the erase button. It would not give her much time, but some would be better than none. She would survive this thing, as she had survived so many others.

Fire lanced through her, from the center of her being straight through her brain. Janette fell to her knees. Holding her arms tightly against her chest, she rested her forehead on the floor, concentrating on her hate, on the thought that now she had an answer, and on not making a sound that would wake Nicola.

And all the while, the tape whizzed above her, erasing the message.

Part 12: In which there are secrets

The further south Nicholas made his way down Botolph Lane, the worse the heat and flames became. Buildings that were blackened deeper than pitch or darkest midnight still burned, the smoke gray and wispy against the ever-darkening sky. Dusk was fast approaching, yet it brought no relief for London. The city continued to burn.

Abandoning the black cloth he'd held over his head, Nicholas now used his cloak to hide the fine cut and cost of his clothing. The wharves had never been the safest place in London and now that the rats had been burned from their dingy bars and dens, there was a new element lose in the crowd. Time and again he found the eye of a man taking his measure. Each was met squarely, with an unflinching gaze. The thugs slunk away, looking for easier prey.

He knew Janette would not be so lucky. And that thought pushed him onward through the crowd, struggling against the tide that kept trying to push him northward.

When he reached Thames Street, he turned one way, then another, lost. Landmarks had gone— church steeples long since tumbled, burnt to the ground. He could feel the wind coming in from the water, but it was hot and filled with the grit and ash of the burning wharves and warehouses. He had never been to the Ram's Horn. Janette had mentioned it in passing, during one of her brief visits to their lodgings over the past few months. LaCroix had seemed only mildly interested in where she plied her trade and her answer had been just as offhand. It could have been the truth, or a lie, meant to appease LaCroix.

Once he realized that he had no absolute knowledge of where Janette might be in the midst of this burning city, panic set into his heart.

It was then that he heard, above the cries and screams of refugees and victims, a very female voice, cursing in French. The words were far from delicate, and any lady of quality would have blushed to encounter them for the first time, her reputation in danger should she admit having heard them before.

He pushed aside the crowd before him, moving west, into the heart of the burning city.

And there, her fine dress covered in soot, ragged and torn, was Janette. There were smudges of ash on her face and her skin was far too fine and pale against the skins of the men at whom she shouted. The sun had yet to set, but there was a faint amber glow in her eyes as she pleaded and cajoled, bribed and threatened.

Nicholas was able to reach her side in a matter of minutes. Catching her around the waist, he twirled her in his arms to face him and lifted her into the air.

The amber in her eyes grew more pronounced at the indignity, but she broke into a loud cry when she saw who held her thus. Her arms knotted around his neck and she kissed him. "*Chevalier,*" she whispered, kissing his cheek, then the lobe of his ear. She drew away before he could kiss her again. "Ah, you're filthy."

"No worse than you." He ran his glove down the bridge of her nose, removing the black ash. "I'd feared the fire had gotten you."

"I feared the same for you," she admitted. "But not LaCroix. He knows death too well. He'll always stay a step ahead of the reaper."

"This is no place to talk." Grabbing her arm, he started to drag her after him. "Come, there's safety in the west—"

"No!" Janette broke away and turned back to the men, who were fighting the fire that licked at what was left of the Ram's Horn tavern. "Ah, now some of them have run off. Here!" she cried, scattering a handful of coins underfoot. "There's more if you beat the flames! Save the tavern!"

All of the men stopped long enough to scrabble for the coins she scattered, as did a few of the refugees close enough to grab one of the metal disks that rolled beneath the trampling feet of the crowd. Some joined those who were carrying water from a cistern to douse the flames. That, added to the kegs that were being emptied onto the burning walls, was the sum of the effort.

The facade of the building was still in place, but the thatch and wood roof had long-since burned. A loud crash from the interior signaled the loss of the upper story. Soon, the floor beams would give way and the cellar would be filled with burning remnants.

But Janette didn't seem to understand that the cause was lost. Her face was filled with an expression that troubled him— hope. He had thought her long since past caring for anything. Yet she continued to scatter the coins when the men began to tire or their enthusiasm flagged.

Nicholas stood behind her. "The building is gone, Janette. Leave it. What does it matter to you? We should go, before your friends decide to leave off at their efforts and take the coins from you by force."

As she turned to face him, her mouth set in a grim line. "I cannot. If you are afraid, Nicola, then go. Find safety. I will stay."

"It is done!" he insisted, pointing at the building, all the while knowing that his words wouldn't help her to see what her own eyes refused to accept. "It's time we left."

"I can't leave."

"LaCroix is waiting."

He was certain LaCroix could find them, no matter where they went. It was a half-truth, at best. But Janette didn't know that. The amber rose in her eyes again, but this time they were fearful.

Then she turned back to face the tavern. "It was mine," she whispered. "It was almost mine."

Nicholas placed his hand on her shoulder. "What matters if you bedded the owner—"

"It was *mine*!" she hissed, whirling on him. "Paid in gold. Mine, as full as the law allows in this barbaric place." She tipped her chin upward in defiance, but the fear was still there in her eyes. And he knew why.

"You did not ask LaCroix."

It was a statement, the truth of it reinforced by the way her chin trembled. She looked back to the building. "He told us to be careful with our funds, that they would make our nights easier. He cannot fault me for being attentive to his words."

"And when it came time for us to leave, to move on?" She didn't answer— not in words. It was in the set of her jaw, a sudden hardness in her eyes. "You would have stayed. Or tried to."

The sign of the Ram's Horn swung loosely from its mooring; one chain was broken and the post that held the other in place was smoldering. With a final gust of wind, the chain broke and the sign crashed to the ground.

That signaled the end. Many of the workmen grabbed what was left of the open kegs, others dodged into the wreck, looking to salvage what they might.

"It was *mine*," she repeated. She pushed her way through the crowd, not heeding the burning edges of the roof, and knelt down in the dirt to touch the sign. "I am so tired of traveling, Nicola. This would have been a place. For us. For our kind."

He stayed close to her, watching her back, watching the crowd, who had seen her with her shining coins. "LaCroix never would have let you keep it." Placing a hand on her shoulder, he added, "Better *it* burn, Janette, than you."

Her eyes were flashing amber as she rose to face him. "I will never burn. Never! Not even LaCroix—!" But then she stopped and paled. Her hand rose to her open mouth and she looked around quickly. "He is near. Not near enough, but near."

"Then we should go." Nicholas placed his arm around her waist, guiding her into the crowd. He wanted to put as much distance between them and the evidence of Janette's momentary defiance of LaCroix, before the vampire caught up with them. "It will be our secret," he whispered to her.

She reached across to the hand that rested over her shoulder, her fingers intertwining with his. At that moment, they shared their fear of something more dangerous to them than the fire. And it was that fear that led them through the flames, to safety.

* * *

It was a sound that woke him from his sleep, a soft humming from the lower floor. Nick rose from his bed, tossing the covers away, and went to the door of the bedroom.

From the upper railing, he could see the apartment stretched beneath him. The clock and his inner senses told him that the sun was setting, that night was again bringing the only safety he and his kind could ever know. With the shudders tightly closed and the lamps extinguished, there was little light to see by.

But neither he nor any other vampire needed the light to see. And he would not have needed it to see Janette. She had propped herself in the corner of the loft, where the two brick walls met. Her face was pressed against the stone, her skin seeking the cool, rough surface. She had drawn her knees against her chest and her arms were wrapped around them. Sitting there, she rocked back and forth, humming softly.

He didn't know what to do, at first. His memory of their day together was blurred by moments of grief, and joy, and fury. The blind fury burned hottest in his mind—he remembered how she had tried everything she knew to goad him into killing her, how she had nearly succeeded. And how he had abandoned her, fearing that if he stayed with her, she might push him so far that he *would* kill her, before he regained his senses.

Quietly, he made his way down the iron staircase, to the lower floor. His hunger was a small flame in his heart and he hissed at it, feeling ashamed that he might take pride in his chosen abstinence, while Janette starved because she had no other choice.

Her eyes were open, but Janette made no sign that she knew he was near. He hesitated again when he reached the bottom of the steps. Her skin, usually pale, was the color of parchment. Still smooth, it had lost much of its suppleness, which had been swallowed by the internal fire that consumed her.

He walked over to her and crouched down beside her. "Janette?"

The humming ceased. "Mmmmn?" was her only response.

Nick touched the palm of his hand to her cheek and she moved, finally, against his cool hand. Her own skin was hot, in comparison.

"I dreamed of London, Janette," he whispered. "And the tavern."

"The... Raven—?"

There was a faint spark in her eyes, although her voice was weak. Her mouth was too dry to form words. "Before the Raven," he said softly. "The first time. The Ram's Horn."

Her head turned to face him, her eyes fixing on his. Wherever she had gone to face the pain and inner fire, he was bringing her back from it. But he needed her to be here. If he was to find Gregory in time and save her, he'd need her help.

"It was... so very long... ago." Janette licked her lips, her eyes still locked with his. Slowly, she held out her hand to him.

Taking her fingers carefully in his, he brought her hand to his lips, kissing it. Then he placed his arm around her shoulder, and helped her to stand.

Before, she had always seemed as light as a feather to him, but now her composition seemed even more tenuous, as if she might blow away like flowers dried in the pages of a book. She rested, leaning against his chest for a moment. She was slow in coming back to herself, but her mind had not left her.

Even though he had.

Nick rested his chin on top of her hair. "I'm sorry, Janette. I ran away ... "

"Sssh." A warm, dry hand folded over his. "I am still here... Nicola." Janette tilted back her head, so that he could look down at her and meet her eyes again. "I have not thought of... the tavern for a long time. You have never mentioned it."

She looked down at the floor. "He was so angry at you for having left him. It would have been so easy—" The edges of her too-red lips managed the barest smile. "What else have I forgotten about you? What other secrets have we shared, that no longer live within us?"

"There *are* no more secrets."

Her fingers left his hand, then tips brushed his cheek. "Nicola, you are still *so* like a child. There are always secrets. They are part of what we are."

One hand on the wall, the other on his chest, Janette balanced herself, then smiled at him. She took a step, then another, her hand never moving too far from the support of the wall, or him. "I shall dance again, I think," she announced, after she managed three steps in succession. "And soon."

It was then he realized that she was fully dressed. His bathrobe had been replaced by one of her finest dresses, her hair was brushed and carefully styled, and even her makeup was in place, smudged only at the very corner of one eye.

She met his stare, then said, "If I must burn, I will burn well."

"No one would know."

"*I* would know." Then she frowned, darkly. "And Alma would know. And she would tell *everyone*."

He didn't bother to hide his amusement. And, after she glared at him, even Janette smiled. Nick trailed behind her, watching her steps become steadier, her progress faster.

But she stopped abruptly and grabbed the corner of the couch for support, bending almost double. Nick caught hold of her, but she pushed him away, gasping. After a few seconds, she straightened, her lips drawn into a grim line.

He could see that the intensity of the hunger had increased dramatically since he had left her. And if this were the pain she could withstand, what must the bouts with the beast be like?

"How... bad is it?"

He realized as soon as the words left his lips that it was a stupid question. Janette looked at him with an expression of pain that had less to do with the beast than her estimation of his intellect. After shaking her head slightly, she walked into the kitchen, directly to his refrigerator.

He shadowed her. "What are you doing?" he asked worriedly, as she reached into the refrigerator and withdrew a bottle of cow's blood.

"Making you breakfast." She placed the bottle on the counter, then looked coyly at him, over her shoulder. "Doesn't Natalie make you breakfast in the evening, when she spends the day?"

Brushing past her, he took the bottle out of her hands. "I've told you— it's not like that between Natalie and I."

"Ah," said Janette, pointing at him, "but you wish it *could* be..."

Exasperated, he walked away from her, still holding the bottle of blood. The very nearness of it awakened his hunger, but he tried to ignore the burning sensation. Exposing Janette to blood would be a foolish move at the moment.

The answering machine distracted him— there were no flashing lights. He glanced over at Janette, who was studying the objects in the container of kitchen utensils Nat had given him. "Did I get any calls? I was hoping— I thought Nat would call, at least."

Janette looked down, suddenly very intent on the spatula she held in her hand. "Nicola, I was occupied with... other things."

Again, he'd said something desperately stupid. "Yes, well— Schanke said he'd try to get a line tap approved. I told him that you'd been my lead on Mercer and that Mercer might try to get to you."

"Secrets, Nicola?" She frowned, checking her reflection in the flat metal utensil she added to the spatula. "I suppose I'll have to go upstairs."

"It would be best," he agreed.

Janette stuck the spatula back into the canister. "Mortals annoy me. Especially this— this—"

"Schanke?" supplied Nick. Crossing his arms, he walked back to the kitchen and placed the bottle of blood on the countertop. Now *this* was the Janette he knew well.

"Yes. This *partner* of yours. He leers at every pretty young thing at my club. He's just such a— a—"

Nick waited, as she sputtered, searching for a word. "Schanke," he offered, again.

"Yes!"

The phone rang. They stared at one another. Then, as it rang a second time, Nick moved to answer it.

Janette was there, before he'd even blinked. "It's for me."

There was a flash of amber in her eyes. Taking his hand from the receiver, he backed up a step, silently cursing Schanke. If this was the call they'd been waiting for, it was too late for a trace. But the situation was salvageable—he could still hear what Mercer said.

Janette held the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Janette?" Nick could make out the blatant surprise in Mercer's voice. "I'm pleased to find you in."

"Don't you mean, you're pleased to find me at all?" she asked, not bothering to hide her bitterness.

"Pleased, at least, to find you're more clever than I thought." Mercer paused, Nick knew that he was adapting his plans to this new situation. "My offer is still open. Is your answer the same?"

This time, Janette paused. Her eyes met Nick's, then she grimaced, gasping slightly as the hunger struck again. "I— I will give you— the Raven. And— anything else. I need—"

"I know what you need," said Mercer, his tone of voice smoother than satin. "And I have it with me. Meet me, now."

"W–Where?"

"I've yet to find new accommodations. Why not where you asked me to take you, on the first day? You remember." He paused again. "I'll be waiting, Janette. But I won't wait long."

The phone went dead in her hand. The instant the connection was broken, Janette leaned heavily against the table, then her elbows gave way. Nick caught her before she hit the floor and carried her to the couch.

She wasn't sweating, she had no liquid left in her to sweat, but her skin was even warmer and her eyes were fever-bright. He smoothed her hair from her forehead and held her hand, angry at himself for doing nothing, yet knowing there was nothing he could do.

The spasms ended quickly, this time. Janette relaxed, falling limp like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She tried to lift herself from the couch, but Nick put his hand on her shoulder. "Wait, we have time."

"You—have time. I don't," she corrected. Forcing a smile, she gave him a nod, then let him help her to a sitting position.

"Do you know where he is?" asked Nick.

"A pay telephone, probably." She looked down at the floor. Bending forward, her fingertips massaging her temples, Janette sighed. "There were so many places we went on the first day. Gregory is— so much cruder than I first thought." Dropping her hands to her lap, she sat upright and met his eyes. "Nicola, I must think. And it is so hard, with the hunger—"

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead. "You need some sleep. Why don't you go upstairs? Schanke will be here any minute. I'll have to find a way to get rid of him. Maybe I'll send him on a wild goose chase, to Mercer's apartment."

"No, not there—" warned Janette. "You said they searched, but there still might be things there that he should not see. You must protect the others, Nicola. And yourself."

"And you?" he asked.

Janette drew herself up straight, frowning slightly. "I've always taken care of myself."

"Yes. You have," he agreed. Then his kissed her forehead again. "Now, go lie down. Try to sleep."

"I will." Janette rose from the couch and started for the iron staircase.

Nick moved to follow her, but the alarm on the lower door sounded. He walked over to the screen, dimly aware that Janette had paused at the bottom of the staircase. He hit the intercom.

"Nick, it's me," said Schanke, staring up at the video monitor. He held up a large, black case. "I got that paper for your trace and the hardware. So open up already."

"Just a second, Schanke." Nick turned, but Janette was already beside him.

"Nicola, you never dress for the occasion. Now what will your *partner* think when he enters, if you are in your pajamas and I am sleeping upstairs, hmn?" She handed him his bathrobe, then leaned past him, hitting the button to unlock the lower door and elevator. "Come in, Detective Schanke. Nicola is almost decent."

Rolling his eyes, Nick swatted her lightly with the back of his hand and caught a glimpse of Schanke leering into the video camera. By the time he turned his attention back to her, Janette was already half-way up the stairs.

She faced him, hands behind her back, leaning on the railing. "Nicola?"

"Yes?" He slipped his arms into his bathrobe.

"You will forgive me for last night. I didn't want to hurt you. But... the hunger..."

Nick smiled and shook his head. She wasn't asking. Janette seldom offered forgiveness, but she always seemed to demand it from others. "Go to sleep, Janette."

With one hand, she blew him a kiss.

Sighing, Nick rubbed his hand over his eyes, just as glad that Janette would be upstairs while Schanke was here. If her ravenous hunger for blood collided with Schanke's almost preternatural fascination for shapely female flesh— he doubted even he could keep them apart. Or would ever want to try.

Nick stepped aside, returning to the kitchen as the elevator reached the loft. He had just enough time to put Janette's attempt at 'fixing breakfast' back into the fridge— and away from Schanke's prying eyes.

The bottle wasn't there.

Nick spun, eyes scanning the room, then he opened the refrigerator— the bottle was nowhere to be seen. And if the bottle was missing ...

He ran to the foot of the staircase, calling, "Janette?"

She didn't answer. The sound of the elevator door opening stopped him from taking flight. Schanke bounded into the loft, eyes wide, grinning. "So, Nick, where's the little lady?"

There was a crash from upstairs— the sound of one of the upper windows breaking. Grabbing the railing, Nick started up the stairs, but Schanke was no more than a few steps behind him. Stopping in the center of the staircase, he blocked his partner's advance. "You just missed her, Schanke. You just missed her."

Part 13: In which Janette takes care of herself

Janette stood with her back to the bedroom door, but there was no sound of immediate pursuit. She opened the door to Nicola's closet and slipped into one of his black leather jackets—it was far too large for her, but she needed hiding places, and her slinky black dress left little to the imagination. Turning, she headed for the window—

Then she saw the gun. He had left it in its holster, draped over a chair.

Knowing she had no more than seconds, Janette pulled her arm out of the jacket sleeve and placed the strap of the holster over her shoulder. As it was set for Nicola's proportions, it rested against her hip. The bulk of the jacket covered it nicely.

But there was sound from below— she heard the elevator. And then Nicola called her name.

Janette raced to the window and leaped through it, tucking her chin low and shielding her head with her arms. The black leather took the brunt of the flying glass, but it meant that she was away and safe for the moment. Nicola didn't know where she was going. And until he could evade his partner, he would be kept from following. She owed Detective Schanke her gratitude. It annoyed her to add another mortal to her list of debts.

She concentrated on flying, concentrated on keeping aloft, on using every bit of energy she had left to get to her destination. The hunger had weakened her, but the anger made her strong again, aided by the comfort of darkness.

It did not take her long to reach the hotel and even less time to find the balcony, dark and seemingly empty. Gregory had phrased his clue well. She hoped it would be the last time that his plans succeeded.

He was waiting for her, standing at the balcony railing. Janette landed easily, hands in her pockets. She shifted the jacket, showing just enough of the dress, and herself, to put him at ease.

"You're late."

His tone was surprisingly cordial, for someone who'd expected to find her burnt to ash. Janette matched his easy air with a light smile, ignoring the fierce fire inside her, the torment that could only end with the taste of sweet blood on her tongue. "Not as late as you might have hoped."

Gregory smiled, his eyes showing a gleam of amber. His clothing was somber, but well-tailored. "I see you've dressed for the occasion. I didn't think our meeting would be this formal. Then again, are you dressed for a funeral... or to toast our future success?"

She wanted to rip out his throat, to throw him from the balcony and tear at him as he tried to fly, forcing him to fall. But her life depended on her assuming the one role for which she'd been born— the gracious hostess. Affecting a hurt tone, Janette pouted. "What an unkind comment. I agreed to join you because of your charm, Gregory."

"And because I can give you what you need?"

She smiled, lightly, and batted her eyelashes, taking a step toward him. "That, too."

He withdrew the bottle from a small black bag that stood beside his leg, and offered it to her, as he had at The Raven two nights before. "I'm afraid I didn't think to bring glasses."

"Nor did I." Janette closed her eyes for a moment, but the image of the bright red liquid had burned into her inner eye, stirring the hungry beast within her. When she opened her eyes, she realized that the color and the crystal almost glowed in the darkness. "I suppose... we can make do," she whispered, her voice deserting her.

Gregory removed the crystal stopper from the bottle, then extended it to her. "Ladies first."

It took every ounce of willpower Janette had not to wrench the bottle out of his hand. She swooned as she smelled the sweet scent that rose from the narrow opening, her fingers grasping the balcony railing to keep herself from falling to the concrete.

It called to her, that shimmering brightness, the promise of light and birdsong. If she accepted, it would mean giving Gregory absolute mastery over her. Nicola, and his mortal sentiments, would become a danger to her. But she would walk in the sun...

One hand still clutched the railing while the other reached for the bottle... then it fell to her side. Looking up, she met Gregory's eyes. "You wanted to see me burn," she whispered, the fire inside her stealing her voice. "How do I know that bottle doesn't carry oblivion?"

"Because you know I want The Raven." He took a step closer to her, so that the bottle was only an inch between them. "Because you know I want you. You *know* that."

Janette caressed the design on the cool crystal with her fingertips, but did not take what he offered. "I *know* that I will drink... if you will drink." Her eyes refused to release him, holding his gaze. "I will not burn, Gregory. Not for you. Nor for anyone, or anything."

He nodded, then lifted the bottle to his lips, sipping it. As he swallowed, the fire knifed through her, so that she was forced to clutch the railing for support. Gregory lowered the bottle, his hand reaching to help her, but she backed away, hissing, "More! Drink more of it! I will not burn. Prove to me I will *not* burn."

And Gregory drank again. His eyes fixed on hers, he lifted the bottle to his lips and drank deeply, a small bit of blood trickling down from the corner of his mouth, resting on his collar.

Forcing herself upright, Janette tottered, leaning into his arms as he moved to catch her. The leather jacket kept her from feeling the cool crystal against her back, his arm around her, supporting her. Her weight, such as it was, forced him back, against the balcony wall.

Snarling, her eyes burned amber and her fangs extended. Before he knew what was happening, she tore the collar from his neck with her teeth and sunk her fangs into his throat.

Gregory's hands flailed at her shoulders and her throat, searching for a hold. She drank deep, sucking the fresh, sweet blood from his body. The beast in her wouldn't let him go. Pinned as he was, there was no room for leverage. He was helpless against the experience she had gained over centuries with thousands of struggling victims. When he tried to use the crystal bottle as a club, her hand grasped his wrist and forced it back against the concrete, hard. They were showered with crystal shards and sweet blood, but Janette didn't really notice.

There was only the blood, the blood that fed her hunger but would not make her burn, the blood that was her life.

His legs buckled and he sank against the wall. Janette followed the fall of his body. Still drinking, she absorbing all that he was and had been, savoring his petty evils and fruitless greed. Despite the sunshine that he had swallowed, his blood was bitter and dark. It was a vintage she would have passed even for a diet of Nicola's cow's blood.

It was that thought that made her stop. Janette withdrew from him, sitting back on her haunches, his blood covering her dress and Nicola's leather jacket. Taking a handkerchief from her decolletage, she wiped daintily at her lips. "Thank you, Gregory. You were right— you had just what I needed."

The wounds at his throat were beginning to heal, the jagged tear of her eagerness smoothing at the edges. He stared at her with vacant eyes. She knew he could sense her, could hear her, but her passion and savagery had torn much from him. It might be hours before he would recover enough of himself to walk, never mind to fly and flee from this place.

Feeling cool and refreshed, Janette rose to her feet and stared down at him. "You are too dangerous, Gregory, to me and to our kind. You want to enslave the others, to profit from them. And... you have insulted me."

His eyelids flickered. He moaned, shifting against the wall.

Janette frowned. "Oh, aren't you comfortable? Here, let me help you."

His attempts to escape her were feeble, his hands swept aside as easily as a child's. Kneeling beside him, she propped Gregory so that his back rested against the wall, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. "You should have learned your lessons from your master," she told him, as she straightened his tie and fixed his collar. "I did. I might not have done everything LaCroix demanded, but I listened. And I learned."

Sitting back on her heels, she inspected her efforts on his behalf. He was presentable, if not as dapper as he could be when at his best. "There. And I bet you're hungry, too."

Another amber flame flicked in his eyes.

"Good. Because I have just the thing for you." Pushing aside the front of Nicola's leather jacket, she reached into the lining and unzipped the flap. The bottle of cow's blood that she'd taken from his kitchen had remained unbroken, luckily enough. Although, she noted, looking down at the blood stains on the front of the leather, she'd probably have to add Nicola to her list of debts.

And that was one more thing Gregory would have to repay.

The gold flecks in Gregory's eyes lit again at the sight of the bottle. She smiled, knowing that he was reacting only to the presence of blood. "It's cow," she admitted, making a face. "But it's the best I could do at such short notice. Would you like some?"

Digging her fingernails into the cork, she yanked, pulling it from the bottle. The blood splashed over her hand and she automatically moved to lick it off, then stopped herself. Janette offered the bottle to Gregory with her crimson-covered hand. "Would you like some?"

By now, his mind had begun to work. Weakly, he pushed himself away from her and the blood that would burn him. But there was nowhere he could go—Janette's presence kept him pinned to the wall.

Moving the bottle closer, she raised it to his lips, but he shut his mouth and turned his head. The fluid splashed down his collar and shirt front, staining his tailored jacket.

Curiously, Janette took a bit of the material between her fingers and felt it, then frowned. It was cheap and poorly made. "And I thought you had taste," she muttered. Then, looking at the bottle in her hand, she sighed. "Well, maybe you do. Personally, I despise the stuff, but Nicola likes it well enough. And he's anything but common." Again, she tried to get Gregory to drink the blood.

Again, he twisted away.

Janette made a sound of disappointment, clicking her tongue against the back of her teeth. "You know," she said sadly, "I could make you drink this. I told you, I was well taught. But, perhaps there's a better way—"

Putting the bottle down, she reached into the jacket and found the gun holster. Gregory's eyes widened, then seemed puzzled at the sight of the gun.

"I know," explained Janette, as she ran her hand along the cool metal barrel, "that you'd recover if I shot you. I don't doubt that you've taken a bullet before." Then, she picked up the bottle with the other hand. "Just as I know the places where a bullet causes us some pain and minor inconvenience. An eye takes some time to heal, fully. An ear, well..." She shrugged.

Holding the gun in her right hand and the bottle in her left, she pushed the bottle toward him, near his lips. "You *will* drink, Gregory. You might not be able to hear, or to see, but you *will* drink. Now, show me that you have as much breeding as I first thought."

There was terror in his eyes and some small part of her fed on that terror, the memory of the pain of her hunger still fresh. For that, and for the debts he had caused her to take, and for the hurt that he had forced her to cause Nicola... the fear was a small repayment.

But then that fear was gone. She saw the surrender in his eyes. His hand rose not to try to block the gun or push her arm away, but to close over the smooth, green glass. Nodding, she let his fingers hold the mouth of the bottle, although she never loosed her own hold on it.

Janette tucked the gun into the holster almost thoughtlessly, intent on Gregory—on the first swallow, then the second, on the way his eyes gleamed as the blood entered him. The hunger she had left in him from her feeding would be satisfied, but only for a moment.

Then he would burn.

Releasing the bottle, she rose and backed away from him. But Gregory still had enough strength to keep his fingers from losing their grip. He drank, and drank still, blood trickling down either side of his mouth as he tilted back his head and upended the bottle. The blood was giving him back some small strength. He hadn't been starved or weakened, like the vampire that had entered The Raven, burning before he could fully warn them.

It was empty. Smacking his lips, Gregory threw the bottle over the side of the balcony. Slowly, pushing himself up with his arms, he made it to his knees, then his feet. He leaned against the wall for a moment, resting his head against the concrete. Then, he turned to face her.

His eyes were the gold of the dawn sun, his fangs white and sharp, and strong. Gregory snarled and leaped toward her.

Placing her hands on her railing, Janette vaulted it and began to fly. But Gregory grabbed her shoe, his other hand fastening higher, on her ankle. She kicked against him, trying to fly away, but her bout with hunger had weakened her. She'd need more blood to fight him, more blood to sustain her flight and give her the strength to overpower him.

There was no blood here. Only Gregory remained. And she saw her death in his eyes.

A flash blinded her, so that she stopped flailing at the air and covered her eyes with her hands. Gregory had burst into flame. His scream of rage and anguish tore her hands from her eyes and she looked down at him.

He still stared at her, still snarled at her through the flames that consumed him. Every inch of him was on fire— he burned hot and bright. But his burning hands never lost their grip. He pulled at her, tugging her back toward him, toward the balcony, his hands reaching higher up her leg.

Janette screamed as the burning flesh touched hers, as the leg of her stocking smoldered and burned under his assault. But it was when the hem of her dress flamed suddenly that she knew the fire had won.

And her scream became an unending animal howl against fear and flame and fate.

Part 14: In which the burning ends

Schanke wasn't giving up. He stood on the step just below Nick, craning his neck in an attempt to see Janette. "Just want to pay my respects to the lady. I know she's up there."

"Yeah, well, I don't think she wants to see you right now. Or anyone, for that matter." Nick glanced over his shoulder, following Schanke's gaze. He knew that Janette was gone, but Schanke's insistence would save him some awkward questions later. "Look, she's banned you from The Raven for a while. You want to make that permanent?"

For a moment, Schanke seemed to be considering the idea. But he frowned and turned, walking back down the steps. "I guess not."

Inwardly, Nick sighed with relief. He'd hoped the threat of eternal exile from the club would make his partner back down. If Schanke could continue to ogle shapely young— or young-looking— things in tight dresses, his wandering eyes would remain in his head and he wouldn't get himself and his marriage into a position of irreconcilable differences.

"So, maybe she'll join us later," said Schanke. He dropped the briefcase flat on the seat of the couch. "The Captain and the higher-ups okayed your request for a line tap. I've got the goods right here," he tapped the suitcase with the flat of his hand. "And I'll be happy to baby-sit your phone all night if I have to."

Picking up the case, Nick thrust it into Schanke's arms, then put a hand on his shoulder, propelling him toward the elevator door. "We don't need it— Mercer called just before you showed."

"Damn." Instantly, Schanke became all business, stopping in his tracks. "That means we won't be able to trace him."

"By phone, no. But he wants Janette to meet him in an hour, in the park."

At the sound of her name, Schanke immediately looked to the second floor. "She's not going?"

Nick put on his best incredulous air. "Are you kidding? She's terrified." Pushing his partner toward the door again, Nick lowered his voice. "I think you're right—I should stay here and keep an eye on her— just in case Mercer doubles back. You can handle the park stake-out."

"I can?" Schanke stared at him, then smiled, suddenly appropriating Nick's suggestion as his own. "You're right— how tough can a ninety-year-old drug pusher be? I'll take this back to the station and—"

They were almost at the elevator. "You take that back to the station and the FBI and everyone else who wants a piece of this one will be swarming all over you." Nick placed his hands on his partner's shoulders and met his eyes. "The bust belongs to *you*, Schank. You came up with the syringe. All I did was get a set of prints. You should get the glory for this one."

"Gee, thanks, Nick." Schanke smiled, the corner of his mouth twisting slightly. "But, hey, you deserve credit for coming up with those prints."

Nick nodded, with what he hoped was sufficient humility. Shifting his hand to Schanke's back, he turned him toward the elevator. "There won't be any credit until Mercer's caught, Schank. And you'll do it. Not just for us— for the department."

"Yeah, for the department." Schanke stepped into the elevator. He'd transferred the handle of the case to one hand and made a fist with the other. "I'll get him, Nick."

"I know you will, Schanke." Nick leaned on the elevator button as the door closed, sending Schanke to the lower floor. He glanced up at the upper railing, then action followed thought. He flew the distance, vaulting the railing and landing on the upper floor with a tread as light and swift as a cat's.

"Janette?" Training and experience kicked in— he stood to one side of the bedroom door and turned the handle, letting the door swing into the room. Then he peeked around the corner.

The room was empty. The evening breeze entered through a broken window, causing the sheets on the bed to ripple, and shards of glass covered the floor nearby.

Watching for glass, he crossed over to his closet in bare feet. The closet door had been opened— he was certain that he'd left it closed. A quick look told him that his jacket was missing.

It was a second sense that made him look for the gun. With a thought, he stood beside the chair, but the holster in which it had been hanging had been taken.

That was a puzzle. The blood, he could almost understand. The jacket— well, Janette was Janette. But the gun? What did she need with a gun? She was a vampire.

And... so was he. And so was Mercer.

It didn't take him long to throw on some clothes— enough time to consider Mercer's meeting arrangements and Janette's comments afterwards. Obviously, what Mercer had said meant something to her. She knew where they were to meet.

The problem was, he didn't. Janette hadn't spoken about her days in the light. The only thing she'd mentioned was her first moments, looking at the sun, hearing the birds on the balcony—

The balcony. Which was why she'd used the lame excuse about not sending Schanke to Mercer's apartment on a wild goose chase.

From a police perspective, it was a stupid place to hold a reunion. Any number of police organizations would be watching the interior of that building, checking the coming and going of anyone who might have a connection to Mercer. But the balcony was on the twelfth floor and at a bad angle— they wouldn't be able to see it from a balcony above or below, and the angle from the ground guaranteed an awful lot of privacy. Real surveillance would mean having a helicopter on duty— and from what he'd seen, that kind of money wasn't involved in this investigation.

Slipping his left foot into his boot, Nick paused long enough to grab his other jacket from the closet, then went out the window, following Janette's chosen path— and making a mental note to call for a repair tomorrow. The next time he chose to make his home in an old warehouse, he'd put steel over *all* of the windows. It would save a fortune in glass repairs and provide extra security against unwanted visitors.

A quarter moon sat in the eastern sky. The May night wind was cold, but the temperature didn't matter to him. His concern now was finding Janette. And Mercer. And deciding what to do when he got there.

As he flew, he went over the options in his mind. Janette was mercurial. Over the centuries, he'd learned that for her there was no 'right and wrong,' 'good and evil,' beyond the things that could harm her or actions that were in bad taste or breaches of her own special code of etiquette. If she decided that she wanted to walk in the sun for eternity, then Janette might very well throw in her lot with Mercer, despite the cost in mortal lives and the danger Mercer's plans posed for their kind.

But if she were angry— and he'd seen hatred flash in her eyes at the sound of Mercer's voice over the phone— then she'd never stop until she had retribution. She and Nick were the students of LaCroix and they'd both learned their lessons well. He'd chosen to ignore his, but there were times when Janette proved that she was an apt pupil and for lesser slights than this. If her rage got the better of her, she might kill Mercer outright. She'd done equally foolish things in the past, although she'd never risked her own life in such a way before... but then, even LaCroix had known enough not to cross her like this.

The building was ahead of him. The tower was at least twenty stories high and the shadows made it difficult to tell, at first, which balcony it might be. Then a light flared, like a bonfire or beacon. Even from where he stood, his senses were almost overpowered by the scream of agony and rage that accompanied the fire. Hands over his ears, he continued to fly for the balcony.

Janette was trying to flee, but a flaming thing— it had to be Mercer— had hold of her and was pulling her back. Hands grasping the iron railing on the balcony edge, she resisted Mercer's pull. Her screaming had joined his and lights were quickly popping on up and down the building, on other balconies.

Nick didn't hesitate. He flew straight for Mercer, slamming into him, knocking him through the glass door into the room. The curtain, the carpet, everything was set alight, tongues of fire licking everywhere.

But Nick turned and leapt from the balcony again, catching Janette in mid-air as she lost her grip and plummeted toward the ground. Her dress and stockings were on fire, the rush of the wind from her fall and her flight feeding the flames that fed on her. In her terror, she tried to push him away, but he held her tightly, ignoring the smell of burned silk, and satin, and flesh, only knowing that he had to get her to earth and douse the flames.

Behind him, the screams from the balcony increased. Nick put as much height and lateral distance between himself and the balcony as possible, but saw Mercer standing there, flaming. He tried to fly, tried to come after them, but as he stepped from the balcony, he fell. Like a fireball, Mercer's progress lit the night, his screaming ceasing only when his charred and still burning corpse crashed into the parking lot.

There was dirt below, a vestige of grass and lawn. Nick dove for it, pulling up at the last moment so that Janette tumbled out of his arms as he hit the ground. Ignoring the track of grass he'd plowed up in his landing, he tore off his leather jacket and began to smother the flames that licked at her legs and dress, rolling her in the dirt to kill the fire.

Deprived of oxygen, the flames died. She was lying face down, unmoving. Nick knelt in the dirt, leather jacket in his hands, watching Janette for any sign of spark or smoke. But there was no flicker of flame or tell–tale wisp of gray. Janette *wasn't* burning.

He stared down at her, confused. Then she moaned. She pushed herself up from the ground and turned her head to face him. Janette's eyes opened, red-gold, and she snarled at him, fangs extended.

It surprised him. Nick fell backward, onto his hands, as Janette tried to get her knees beneath her. A whimper escaped her and he could see why— the flesh at her knees was blackened, the upper layers of skin badly burned. But still she tried to rise, snarling, her eyes fierce and wild.

When he first moved to help her, she lunged at him. "Easy, Janette," he said softly. Standing up, Nick slipped his own leather jacket around his shoulders, then reached down to help her again. "It's me. I won't hurt you. We have to go, Janette."

There were police sirens nearby. He could see the building from where they stood, the twelfth floor balcony alive with flame. The fire alarms were sounding, the sirens wailing on the trucks that raced through the night streets.

"We have to go," he repeated, looking around. No one was there. No one had seen them. "Janette?"

This time, when she looked at him, she was herself. The amber still flickered in her eyes, but there was sense and sanity inside her again. Reaching her hand to him, she whispered, "Help me, Nicola. I must see. I must know."

He took her hand, then her arm. Putting one hand beneath her shoulder blades and the other under her knees, he shifted her into his arm.

Again, she whimpered, turning her head into his jacket for a moment, blood red tears trickling down her face. He loosened his hold beneath her knees, but could do little else. Her legs were solid, but badly burned, the flesh falling away in spots in black flakes, blood oozing from beneath the wounds. A mortal might not have survived such an injury. For Janette, with rest and red blood on which to feed, it would be survivable.

If she could feed without burning.

Then, when she looked up at him, meeting his gaze, he saw the red crimson tears at the corner of her eyes and knew. "You've fed."

She nodded, ever so slightly. "It was Mercer. It was the sunlight in his blood. He had me, to cure himself. And... I had him."

Her words were quiet, whispered. "Did you know this?" asked Nick, the beginnings of doubt feeding a fire in his chest. "Did you know this and not tell me?"

"Natal— Natalie ... called." Janette burrowed her head into his shoulder and the soft leather of his jacket, her words muffled against him. "She said it might work. And... it did." She peeked out from beneath a fold of his jacket, eyes bright. "Nicola, you will not be... *too* angry with me?"

Nick was furious, but that fury was dissipated by the pain in her eyes and the pale skin of her face, which was still tightly stretched over her skull. "We'll discuss it later," he warned, in a deep-throated growl. Then he planted a kiss on her forehead. "Much later, foolish, foolish Janette."

Sighing, she snuggled against him. Nick started walking.

"Where are we going, Nicola?" asked Janette.

He didn't bother looking down at her, as he stalked across the grass, heading toward the a darkened space between buildings, where taking flight would be unnoticed. "Home. I'll call Natalie to look at your burns. You'll have to make do with cow's blood until Alma—"

"No!" said Janette firmly, struggling in his arms.

Stopping, Nick was surprised enough to let go of her legs. She would have fallen to her burned knees on the grass, if he hadn't caught her shoulder.

Supported by him, Janette stared into his eyes. He knew the pain must be excruciating, but her eyes were bright with red-gold anger. She'd locked the pain away, ignoring it for the moment, concentrating on her hatred instead. "Take me to him, Nicola. I must see. I must know."

Shaking his head, Nick moved to lift her into his arms again, but she pushed away. When she fell into the grass, a small cry escaped her lips, but that was the only sound he heard for a few moments. He stood, staring down at her, until she twisted her torso, her hands holding her up. "I must see. If I have to crawl there, I *must* see. Or I will never sleep again."

Nick squatted down beside her. Cupping her chin in his hand, he forced her to look at him. "The police are there. And crowds. Mortal crowds. Do you want them to see you like this?" Releasing her, he straightened. "They might recognize me. And they'll take a second look at you. He *burned*, Janette. And you wear the mark of flame, yourself."

She met his eyes without flinching. "I have to see."

"Janette—"

Her chin quivered and she looked down. "I have to see, Nicola. I will not go anywhere with you until you let me see."

"If we waste much more time, your legs could scar. Janette, you need blood. And among all those humans—"

Her attention shot back to him when he mentioned her legs. Her eyelids flicked as she turned her head, but he saw her close her eyes— she couldn't look at the burns. Pounding her fist into the grass, she repeated, "I must see. I will be good, Nicola. I will go with you, then. But first ..."

"Yes. Yes, I know." Reaching down, he lifted her in his arms again, taking care with her legs and knees. "All right."

She was quiet as he made his way between buildings and along the sidewalk. There were few people out this night— although that was something of a misstatement. Fire engines and crowds gathered at the building. Residents in bathrobes and casual clothing were still being evacuated. Firemen were busy— running hoses and shouting instructions— as the twelfth floor burned.

But Nick walked past the mayhem. His chin tucked down, he avoided the eyes of any of the police who might have recognized him. He continued on, to the far side of the parking lot, where he had seen what was left of Mercer fall.

With nothing left to burn, the flames had more or less died seconds after impact. The tar of the parking lot in that area smelled hot and fresh, after being exposed to the sudden fire. All that was left of Mercer was a pile of ash.

Nick checked the area carefully as he approached, but without his keen night vision, no mortal would have noticed the spot— apart from the stench of burned flesh and hot tar. The attention of the crowd was concentrated on the fire twelve floors above and the heroic rescues that would be made tonight. Something inside froze as he thought of the mortals who might die tonight, because of Mercer... and Janette.

But she twisted in his arms, even as he stood beside what remained of Mercer. "Let me down, Nicola."

"Janette, you can't—"

"Let me down!"

Sighing, he gently lowered her legs to the ground. For a moment, her eyes filled with pain and tears, her hands holding desperately to his arm and shoulder as she supported her own weight on her burned legs. And then a shutter seemed to fall behind her eyes, cutting off the pain. There was only the red-gold of her anger.

Releasing her hold on him, Janette tottered to the pile of ash, one shoe missing, the sole of the other broken and burned. She moved slowly, stiffly, and Nick almost called to her to stop, knowing how much pain she must be in. But he closed his mouth and folded his arms across his chest, knowing that she had taken herself to a place beyond the pain. If she had to do this thing, then she would do it by herself.

Janette reached down and picked up a handful of ash. "I condemn you to the wind," she said, in a low voice. "I convict you by the fire. I consign you to the water from the sky and from the sea and from the flesh."

Throwing the ash away from her, she stepped forward and scattered it, grinding it into the still hot tar. "I call upon the earth to swallow you, so that you may never walk the night again."

The wind rose, picking up what ash remained, scattering it. For a moment, there were no crowds of people hundreds of yards away, no sirens or flashing lights, no fire, no sound— nothing except he and Janette and the night.

Janette turned toward him. "I had to see, Nicola. I had to know."

He caught her, before she fell to the ground, unconscious. "Foolish, foolish Janette," he whispered, as he kissed her forehead again. Gathering her in his arms, Nick picked her up and walked into the darkness.

Part 15: In which Janette faces the light— for the last time

She couldn't see him through the crowd of dancers or hear him over the pounding bass of the music, but she knew Nicola had entered the club. Janette kept her eye on the glass of blood in her hand, although her finger moved to her choker. She twisted it absently, the end of her silver strand earrings caressing the back of her hand.

"It's been three weeks, Nicola," she said, as he appeared, suddenly obscuring her view of the club.

Without asking, he slipped into the booth beside her. "We've gone longer than that without seeing one another. Decades, quarter-centuries—"

"Yes." She lifted her glass to her lips and sipped, letting the blood rest on her tongue for a moment before she swallowed. "I remember them all. Vividly."

"That young comte in Paris, if I remember—"

Janette waved her had, brushing away the memory and its consequence. "He's dust, these many centuries. We're forced to take our pleasure where we may, Nicola."

He nodded and she glanced at him sideways, seeing that he, too, seemed ill-at-ease. "The club seems to have survived your temporary absence."

"Yes. Alma did better than I expected. I may give it to her as a gift... eventually," she added, when he shot her a surprised look. "We all tire of our toys sooner or later. And this one will wear thin in time." He looked away, shaking his head. "You think it strange of me?"

"Janette, with all you went through to keep it—"

"I will not have it *taken* from me," she answered sharply. "It's mine. And I may give what is mine, as I please. Speaking of which," she reached across the table and touched a small jewelry box with her fingers. With a flick, she slid it to Nicola's hands. "Please give this to your *friend*, Natalie, with my compliments."

Again, Nicola seemed surprised. She smiled to herself and concentrated on the dance floor when he opened the box. The necklace had been crafted to her specifications, a silver double strand chain, with a silver heart hanging from the center. "It isn't priceless," she commented, hearing him close the box, "but it's worth the debt I owe her."

There was sadness in his voice. "That's all you consider it, a debt?"

"She is well-versed in her healing craft. My legs are as lovely as ever, if a bit stiff. That will take another week." She couldn't help but smile, remembering Natalie's most recent visit. "I... approve of your choice of her, Nicola. She's intelligent and discreet. Although I'll admit that her witticisms often elude me." Then, when she heard the edge of argument in his intake of breath, "Please don't be cross with me, Nicola. I'm still not myself. I tire easily."

There was a change in him after her words. He slumped back against the seat of the booth. When she glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, she saw that he was still toying with the box. "She might not accept this."

"She will. I told her you'd be annoyed if she didn't."

He sighed, that long-suffering sigh she had grown to know as signal of her minor victories against his almost-limitless patience. "Janette—"

"And did your partner appreciate the cigars?" Leaning back against the couch and abandoning her glass of blood, she smiled at the way Nicola wrinkled his nose.

"He's stinking up the office! The next time you want to give him cigars, ask me. He would have been just as happy with a gift certificate from a souvlaki stand."

"But then, it would not have annoyed you, would it, Nicola?" Leaning her chin on his shoulder, she toyed with the curl of hair above his ear. "Now every time he blows that rancid smoke in your face, you'll think of me."

"I think of you, often, without your little games." He reached up to take her hand from his shoulder, then released it.

Janette intertwined her fingers, resting them on the table. Nicola leaned closer to her, whispering, "Given up on cigarettes?"

"I am not fond of smoke, at the moment." Frowning, she shook her head. She didn't want to speak of it, but the subject continued to slip into their conversation. For all her annoyance at his having absented himself for three weeks, she'd been just as glad not to face him.

"I hadn't thought of the tavern for many years," she said, after as moment. "Do you still dream of it?"

"No. It's gone. In the past." He waved his hand as she had earlier, but his fingers clenched into a fist at the end of the movement, when he dropped his hand to the table.

Janette reached for his hand and uncurled the tight fingers. "There was the winter afterward. When we were rejoined by LaCroix." She shivered, then quickly reached for the glass of blood. "Cruel, cruel winter. He would not have treated you so badly, had you told him about my tavern."

Nicola shrugged in response. She watched him as she sipped from the glass. It was true— there would have been nothing else for him to do, other than play the part of brave chevalier. He'd thought her weak, then, and under his protection. Even when she joined in LaCroix's games of terror and mayhem, he'd considered her less evil than misguided. Now... well, he didn't understand her, but he accepted her for what she was.

Then he met her gaze and she saw that steel in his eyes. A feeling of panic flashed through her. If she'd been well she would have fled, but her legs were still weak. She'd never have gotten away from him in time and he'd have held her there. There was to be no scene. If this had to happen, she would have it quiet, between them.

"Janette," he said softly. "I need to know."

Desperately, she turned to the glass of blood for support, taking a full gulp, looking away from him. This was the moment she'd dreaded. The pain in her legs was momentary, it would pass. But the memories... she did not want to face the memories. Long ago, she'd learned the trick, to care for nothing too much, lest it hurt her; to distance herself from that and those she'd yearned to love the most, knowing they would be her downfall.

Nicola had been an exception. She'd been hurt many times on his behalf, but his own hurt had countered the balance. This thing could never be balanced between them.

"I need to know... about the light."

The words had been said. She refused to look at him, until he placed his fingers beneath her chin and turned her face toward him. She knew what he would see— her hard eyes helpless, the edges brimming with tears at what she could not give.

"I am no artist, like yourself, or Erica," she whispered, in apology. "There is none of that in me. Nicola, I am no more than what you see. I take what I am given, but I cannot give it back."

"Then give me your memories," he said, his voice the only sound she could hear, despite the beat of the dance music and the crowds and the other sounds she knew must be there. "Give me the sights and sounds and feelings of the sun."

"No... " she whispered, her eyes pleading with him. "Nicola, do not ask me—"

"As your gift to me. Repay my debt."

Janette searched his eyes and found no respite in them. They were blue, but the softness she'd seen in the past had been replaced by steel and cold. For the tavern, long ago, when he bore the brunt of LaCroix's anger over many months because he'd tried to save her, had kept her secret hidden when stronger men— and, she admitted, she herself— would have betrayed the trust to find a moment's peace, she owed him. For the use of the mortal friends he'd cultivated and she'd endangered, she owed him. For pushing him into rage, beyond the fragile inner boundaries he so carefully constructed and fought to hold, she owed him.

"You can be very cruel," she told him, trying to harden her own heart and eyes against what would come. "LaCroix's lessons are part of you, however much you may deny them."

The steel flickered and she knew she'd scored a point, but it was not a blow strong enough to free her. "Tell me," he insisted. "Tell me about the light."

She couldn't turn away from him. Her hand reached blindly for the stem of her glass, found it, then the human blood touched her dry lips. It was not so sweet as the sunshine, nor as satisfying, but it was enough. It would have to be enough.

"The... birds. The birds were singing—"

The memories flashed through her as she spoke, and Nicola swallowed them, like a ravenous beast who had been chained too long without food. She spoke of the birdsong and their sweet melodies, how their feathers flashed as they danced in the sky and played and quarreled with one another. She spoke of the sweet knowing of mortal union that she had shared with Gregory, in their dalliance on the balcony. There was the warmth of the light, the feel of sun's kiss on her naked arms, the flash of brilliance on the waves, by the water, the proud wind as it caressed the sails, giving them power to master the blue-sparking wetness.

She gave him the laughter of the children in the park and the soft fur of the small dog that had run up to her, ready to play. She gave him the joy of being part of nature, neither the animals nor the children carrying the fear of her night scent, both accepting her as one of their own. She gave him the clothes and furs and fine silks that she tried as they shopped in store after store, the end of each excursion like the emergence from a dark tunnel, into the warm and nurturing light in the sky.

She gave him the white clouds that hurried after one another, in their unending game of tag in the vast field of blue more perfect than any Renaissance painter's palette. She gave him the perfumes of the shoppers, the lungs filled with clean air tinted with spray from the water, the smell of the grass as she played with the puppy.

Finally, she gave him the light. Those were the images spoken without sound; the dreams of life, and love, and truth that had haunted their daylight slumbers for centuries. But her memories were fresh and clean, and living. She could still taste it on her tongue, see nothing but the brilliant wonder of it in her eyes, feel its warmth on her skin...

A warmth forever denied her. For eternity.

Janette rested her forehead on her arms, exhausted and cold. He had made her think on those things, those things that she'd hoped to keep from touching her. Regret burned in her heart so strong and boldly that she thought, almost hoped, it might burst and send her into oblivion. The hunger that had consumed her had been fire, but this ice crept into the marrow of her bones, chilling her cold, dead body.

There was a touch against her hair, but she brushed Nicola's hand away. She wanted no part of him, for what he had asked her to do. He had made her care about what she had lost, regret all that she held in her heart. If she did not see him for a millennium, it would be too soon.

But his lips brushed her ear, lightly. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice heavy. "You have let me touch heaven."

And, as his presence left her, Janette finally lifted her head from the table. Her eyes glanced this way and that, but none had seen her distress— or they were wise enough to pretend not to see. She turned, facing the soft leather of the booth in the back of the club and, oblivious to the noise and the press of bodies, and the hot blood, she cried for the light, for what she had lost, and what she would never find again.

— The End —

About the Authors and Staff

✎ ***Don Bassingthwaite*** (Internet: `dbassing@epas.utoronto.ca` CompuServe: `70400,1347`) describes himself as "Bright, witty, and charming (after a shower and coffee anyways)." Don is a Masters' student in the University of Toronto Museum Studies Program. He's 24, a fantasy writer, and a diehard electronic mail fan ("You can't proofread a telephone call"). Other current and future projects include working on a few short stories and and getting around to taking a time management course (when he has an opening in his schedule).

✎ ***Mary Farrell*** (Internet: `MFARRELL@admin.cabot.nf.ca`) Mary is a outwardly well-adjusted secretary, who's fortunate enough to have been granted unlimited INTERNET access by her unthinking employers. She lives in a 200-year-old house, with a huge dog, a mad hamster, and various members of her family, on an island floating merrily slightly off the Eastern Atlantic coast of Canada, where she spends her time flipping frantically through TV channels, hoping against hope that they will eventually show FK in her area!

✎ ***Susan M. Garrett*** (Internet: `susang2522@aol.com`) Let's face it, Susan's fascination with literary vampires has become a lifelong pursuit, but it does have limits ("I'd rather *see* than *be* one."). She's the Assistant Director of MIS for the Township of Dover, alumnus of the University of Dallas, active participant in fannish consumer advocacy, a writer and editor, and a founding member of the Cult of the Black Aura. Susan generally plays well with others, her penmanship shouldn't be spoken of in polite society, and she's currently being treated for her addiction to being photographed with Disney characters and Universal monsters.

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✎ ***Valerie Meachum*** (Internet: vmeachum@freenet.scri.fsu.edu) has written *Forever Knight* and other fanfic for *Good Guys Wear Fangs, Turn of the Wheel, On the Wings of the Knight,* and *Faded Roses.* Not satisfied with simply scribbling (which she has discovered to be the best way to get zines without going broke), she also edits the vampire zine *Heart's Blood* and the letterzine *Highlander Buzz,* and is currently attempting to develop *Chevalier Noir,* a French-language FK zine. Valerie mostly makes her living as a preschool teacher, and otherwise occupies herself as actress, dancer, operatic soprano, pop singer, costume designer, dollmaker, and freelance desktop publisher. Her hobbies include serving as vice-president of the *Forever Knight* Fan Club and collecting dolls and languages. All this should sufficiently explaing why she is known in FK fandom as "The Prima Ballerina of the Father Time Boogie"!

✎ ***Lisa McDavid*** (Internet: d020214@univscvm.csd.scarolina.edu) is a *Forever Knight* fan usually disguised as a University of South Carolina librarian. When not thinking of *Forever Knight,* and sometimes when she is, she is a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism, an email addict, and an incorrigible cat person — not necessarily in that order.

✎ ***Pamela K. Rush*** (Internet: pkrush01@ukcc.uky.edu) Pamela writes: I'm a librarian at the University of Kentucky with a long-time interest in genre literature and film, including fantasy/SF, and although I have occasionally presented or published criticism in this area in the past 20 years, this was the very first fiction I had written since high school!

✎ ***Sharon S. Scott*** (Internet: SCOTTS@baylor.ccis.baylor.edu) is the Special Collections Catalog Librarian at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. An avid fan of *Forever Knight* and Geraint Wyn Davies, she's also interested in rock & blues, Sting, quilting, cats, Pekes, vampires...

✎ ***Karin Welss*** (Internet: karinw@mdli.com) works as a senior technical writer for a software company in the San Francisco Bay Area. *Forever Knight,* her work as Production Editor on this fanzine, and her memberships on the FORKNI–L and FKFIC–L lists are her first ventures into organized fandom, and she's been having entirely too much fun with it! Karin is currently collaborating with Marian Gibbons on a trilogy of vampire novels set in an original universe, which will chronicle the adventures of Roland D'Agincourt and Sharibet, among others. She hopes to someday soon retire from writing software documentation and write fiction full-time. Unfortunately, nasty realities like her mortgage payment rear their ugly heads at intervals and demand regular feedings...